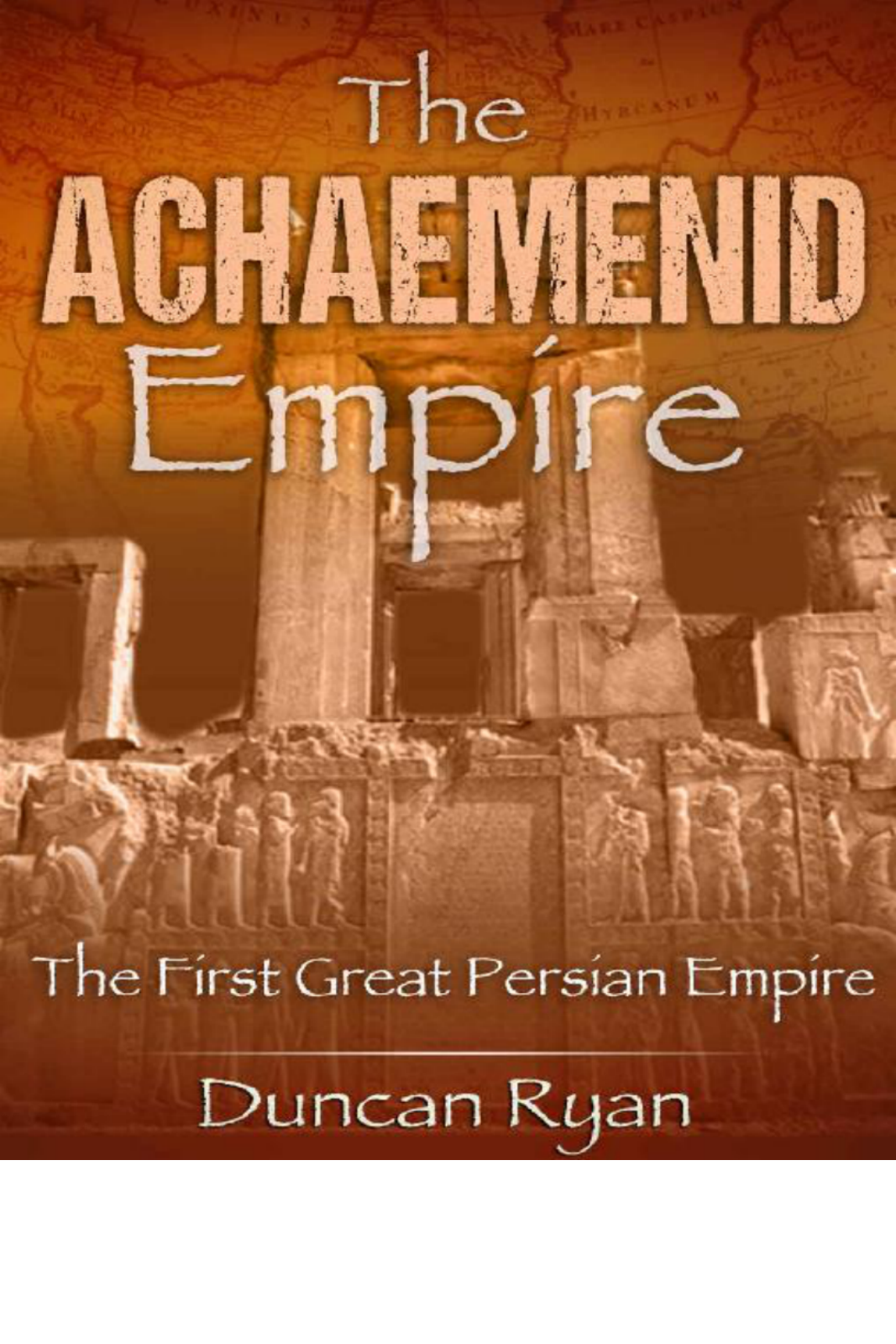


The Achaemenid Empire: The First Great Persian Empire

Duncan Ryan

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The background of the cover features a sepia-toned image of ancient Persian ruins, including large columns and bas-reliefs. Overlaid on the top portion of this image is a faint, historical map showing regions like 'MARE CASPIUM' and 'HYRCANUM'.

The **ACHAEMENID** Empire

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The Achaemenid Empire

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Introduction

Ancient Mesopotamia and the regions that surround it have been a center of human civilization since the beginning of recorded history (indeed, it was here that recorded history itself began). The great civilizations of the lands bordering the Tigris and Euphrates rivers have a history that goes back more than 6,000 to the ancient Sumerians and continues through the cultures of ancient Babylon and Assyria. Nearby, an equally great civilization, that of the Elamites in modern-day Iran, continued almost uninterrupted from the beginning of historic times until the sixth century BCE. By this time, these great civilizations had long passed their peak, and the time had come for another culture to sweep into the regions that had made up Elam and Mesopotamia and begin a new empire that would become the greatest power the ancient world had ever known.

This new power would become the Persian Achaemenid Empire, a

massive land empire that, at its height, would stretch from India in the east to the lands bordering ancient Greece in the west. This empire would form the basis of ancient Persian influence and go on to become the first of four great land empires based in Iran that would dominate the east for a total of nearly 1,200 years and have a massive influence on the history of the entire world. As the founder of this line of great powers, the Achaemenid Empire can safely be said to have been one of the most important forces in the shaping of ancient history. From the famous series of wars fought with the ancient Greeks to the creation of a rich cultural and intellectual heritage, the Achaemenid Empire would have a profound impact on the world around it that would influence the course of history long after its decline and replacement by later empires and kingdoms.

This short history of the Achaemenid Empire will trace the history of this incredible power of the ancient world, the peoples and lands that made it up and the kings who ruled it from the beginning of the Achaemenid era in 550 BCE until its end in 330 BCE. It is the objective of the author that this book stand alone as an enlightening and informative guide to the history of this incredible empire, but also that it act as a framework upon which future study of the Achaemenid Empire may be built. This short history will also be designed in such a way that it will be approachable and accessible to those with little specialized knowledge of Persian history or the ancient history of the Near East in general.

Section One

Iran Before the Achaemenid Empire and the Origin of the Persians

Although the Persians would form their massive empire from their power center in modern-day Iran, they were neither natives of the region nor the first great power to arise there. Based on the distribution of the Iranian languages related both to ancient Old Persian and to modern Persian (Farsi), scholars have traced the origins of the Iranian peoples, the Persians included, to the steppes of Eurasia, in the region that is today made up of the Central Asian Republics and parts of Russia. Precisely when the migration of the Iranian peoples out of these regions and into the modern-day region of western Iran began is not known. However, it is generally accepted that by 1000 BCE, the Persians, as well as several other related groups, had arrived in what is today Iran.

Following an event known as the Late Bronze Age Collapse, which is generally dated to about 1178 BCE, the Persians and other Iranian peoples would have moved into a region dominated by once-great civilizations that had reached a low point in their histories. However,

it would not be long before at least one of these civilizations, that of ancient Assyria, would experience a renaissance and a final period of power over the region that would eventually be incorporated into the Achaemenid Empire. This period of Assyrian history, which is known as the Neo-Assyrian Empire, was the era that produced such noted rulers as Tiglith-Palaser III, Sennacherib and Ashurbanipal, the latter of whom would prove to be the last great king of the Assyrian empires, though certainly one of the most prominent. Less than two decades after the death of Ashurbanipal, under whom the Neo-Assyrian Empire had flourished both culturally and militarily, the empire collapsed. Its final defeat would come in 609 BCE, when an army made of up Babylonians, Persians, Medes (another Iranian group of Central Asian extraction) and other groups which had been subjugated by the Assyrians defeated the armies of Assyria at the Battle of Harran in modern-day Turkey. Historically speaking, this battle is generally seen as the end of Assyrian history and the beginning of the history of the Persians as a major power in the Near East.

Before the Persians would have their chance to rule, however, the Medes achieve regional hegemony, which would ultimately last for less than a century before the Achaemenid Empire would replace it. This regional dominance has, for much of history, been labeled as the Median Empire. Modern historians, however, have found little evidence that it was an empire in the true sense of the word, instead being more of a powerful regional sphere of influence. This Median

influence, however, was probably quite unchallenged, forming a pseudo-empire across many lands and creating an early template for the soon-to-arrive Persian empire. Indeed, the Achaemenid Empire would superimpose itself over the lands briefly under the dominance of the Medes before expanding outward into lands that had never before been incorporated into either the Assyrian or the Median empires. However, the Achaemenids would not gain control of the Medes, who had been the dominant force in Iran since the migration of both groups into the region several hundred years earlier, until 550 BCE, when a Persian leader by the name of Cyrus the Great would overpower the Median rulers. Even though this event in history truly begins the history of the Achaemenid Empire, the history of the Achaemenid line of kings itself goes back more than 100 years earlier, and it is here that we must begin with our exploration of the Achaemenid Empire.

The very name of this empire is derived not from any great king or of the people who populated it, but from a comparatively minor Persian leader who, if he was a real historical figure at all, probably lived and reigned in the early 7th century BCE. This ruler, named Achaemenes, is named in a lineage of Persian kings in an inscription called the Behistun Inscription, historically notable for having been the key piece of text that allowed modern scholars to begin to decipher the cuneiform script (Old Persian having been written in cuneiform, which the Persians had adopted from the Assyrians and they from the ancient Sumerians, whose language it was first used to

write). Outside of this inscription, a product of the late 6th or early 5th century BCE, Achaemenes is not historically attested, leading some to conclude that he is a mythological patriarch of the Achaemenid line, rather than a real king of the Persians from a time before their ascent to domination of the later empire. However, whether Achaemenes was a figure from real history or not, it was his name that was eventually lent to the royal house of what was once the greatest empire the world had ever known. If Achaemenes did exist in the time frame that is generally assigned to him, he would almost certainly have been a regional Persian ruler who was under the rule of the Neo-Assyrian Empire and under the narrower regional sovereignty of the more dominant Medes.

Following Achaemenes in the history of the Achaemenid line was his son Teispes, who is generally thought to have ruled the Persians sometime in the mid 7th century BCE, probably at a time when the Persians were no longer under the direct control of the Medes. Teispes, in expanding the territories that were under his control, would eventually capture Anshan, the city that would become the original seat of Cyrus the Great. Anshan had been a major power center in Iran since at least the Early Dynastic Period of Sumerian history (about 2,000 years earlier), a period from which several inscriptions mentioning it have been found. Following this, both Teispes and his immediate successor would label themselves with the title “King of Anshan”. Teispes, upon his death, was succeeded in his rule of Anshan by his son Cyrus I (not to be confused with the first

Achaemenid emperor Cyrus the Great, also known as Cyrus II, who has already been alluded to several times). He is, however, known to have had another son by the name of Ariaramnes, who took control of the province of Parsa, thus splitting the kingdom into two parts, although both were still controlled by Achaemenids. Though Cyrus the Great would descend directly from Cyrus I, Ariaramnes, too, would spawn the line of an eventual Persian emperor, having been the great-grandfather of the emperor Darius I.

Cyrus I is thought to have come to power in Anshan sometime in the middle to later half of the 7th century BCE, and it is with this king of Persia that the role of the Persians in the events leading up to the fall of the Neo-Assyrian Empire begins to become more clear. Early events regarding his rule may be recounted by Assyrian writings that record the actions of a king known as Kuras. Though it has not definitively been established that Cyrus and Kuras were one and the same, it is known that the Kuras lived and ruled in a time contemporary to that of Cyrus and that both were heavily involved with resisting the Neo-Assyrian Empire in the region that is today Iran, making it quite probable that they were, in fact, the same person. The first mention of Kuras involves a revolt staged against Ashurbanipal that lasted from 652-648 BCE, which ultimately ended in a victory for the king of Assyria. A later war record, also from the reign of Ashurbanipal, suggests that Kuras was among a group of kings in modern-day Iran that were defeated in battle by Ashurbanipal and made to send tributary payments to the Assyrians as a result. Whether Kuras was

Cyrus or not, we can clearly see, in the events surrounding this ruler, the tensions that were building against the Assyrians in what is today Iran.



Illustration 1: A stylized cuneiform tablet depicting Ashurbanipal, the last of the great rulers of the Neo-Assyrian Empire. The empire would collapse shortly after his death.

Historical records of Cyrus are virtually nonexistent beyond a few inscriptions that confirm his existence and the Assyrian records

dealing with Kuras, which may or may not actually represent accounts of Cyrus I. However, there are some things that may be inferred about his later reign based purely on historical context. Following the breakup of the Neo-Assyrian Empire, the lands that had once been a part of it split off into smaller regional powers, most falling into the sphere of influence of the Medes or the Mesopotamian city-state of Babylon, which still held great power in the Near East at the time. Presumably, having been in a portion of the former Neo-Assyrian Empire that was generally incorporated into the Median sphere of influence, Cyrus I would have become a vassal king to the Medes, though probably one with a great deal of autonomy within his own lands. The reign of Cyrus would have marked the transition from Assyrian to Median rule of Anshan and Persia in general, creating the power balance that would, in time, be overthrown by his grandson Cyrus the Great.

Following Cyrus I in the pre-imperial Achaemenid line was Cambyses I. Interestingly, if Cyrus I was the same person as Kuras, Cambyses would not have been his oldest son. The Assyrian records dealing with Kuras mention the eldest son of Kuras as having been Arakku. However, given that Cyrus I is generally believed to have had a particularly long reign as the king of Anshan, it is entirely possible that Arakku predeceased his father. It is alternately possible that Cambyses, though the younger, proved to be a better candidate for succession to the throne, prompting Cyrus I to put him ahead of his elder brother in the line of succession. However, since the

identification of Kuras and Cyrus is only tentative, and since even the Assyrian records record only the existence of Arakku and say nothing of his activities in the years after the fall of the Neo-Assyrian Empire, these possibilities should be considered only as reasonable speculation. Whatever the circumstances were that brought his ascension to the throne about, Cambyses I is thought to have succeeded Cyrus I in or around 580 BCE.

When Cambyses I came to power, Persia would still have been under the control of the Medes, who exerted political and military dominance over Iran in the years between the collapse of the Neo-Assyrian Empire and the establishment of the Achaemenid Empire. The last of these Median rulers to control Persia was Astyages, who is thought to have become the king of the Medes in about 585 BCE. Although the Persians were technically under the direct control of the Medes, a close and probably amicable relationship between the two is shown by the fact that Astyages married one of his own daughters, Mandane, to Cambyses I. The Greek historian Herodotus attributed this decision to a prophetic dream had by Astyages in which his grandson by Mandane would overthrow him and create a great new empire. Fearful of this eventuality, Astyages is said to have married Mandane to Cambyses I, who Herodotus reports was selected for his mild and quiet nature, which was unlikely to produce such a conqueror. As with many instances in the *Histories* of Herodotus, we must dismiss this somewhat supernatural motivation. It is much more likely that the marriage of Mandane to Cambyses was a practical

decision meant to solidify the ties between Astyages and one of the more powerful kings within his sphere of influence. The grandson of Astyages, however, would go on to overthrow his grandfather and create the greatest empire the world had yet know, as the offspring of Cambyses I and Mandane of Media was Cyrus the Great, first Achaemenid emperor of Persia.

Section Two

The Rule of Cyrus the Great and the Creation of the Persian Empire

Cyrus II, better known as Cyrus the Great, was born to Cambyses and Mendane in or before 576 BCE. At this time, there is little chance that anyone within the Median sphere of influence could have suspected the massive shift toward Persian domination that would occur during his life and rule. With the Medes controlling the former Elamite lands and a somewhat diminished but still powerful Babylon acting as the leading force in Mesopotamia, there was little to indicate that almost all of the ancient Near East would, within only a few decades, be incorporated into a completely new empire that would rise out of western Iran to become the new dominant force of the ancient world.



Illustration 2: A sketch drawn from a relief of Cyrus the Great at his capital city of Pasargadae.

Little is known of the early life of Cyrus the Great, except that,

throughout his formative years, Persia would still have been a client state of the Median kingdom. The events that would change this political balance would begin in 559 BCE, when Cyrus II ascended to the throne of Persia and became the ruler of Anshan. Interestingly, however, Cyrus did not become the new ruler of the Persians due to the death of his father, who lived until 551 BCE. It is likely that during this eight year period, Cyrus and Cambyses shared the throne, a not entirely unheard-of practice for kings and their chosen successors in the ancient Near East. During these years, however, there can be little doubt that it was Cyrus, not Cambyses, who was the stronger and more influential leader. This is demonstrated by the leading role that Cyrus took over his father during the final Persian revolt against their Median ruler, Astyages.

The war between Cyrus II and Astyages is generally thought to have lasted for about three years, between 553 and 500 BCE. At its outset, Cyrus may have been living in Ecbatana, the Median capital, with his grandfather Astyages while Persian forces were massed in secret for the revolution under the oversight of Cambyses. His attempt to leave Median lands before being assassinated by Astyages may have been the cause of the Battle of Hyrba, which is recorded as the first major battle of the war between the Persians and the Medes. According to the account of Nicolaus of Damascus, a much later Roman historian, the battle of Hyrba occurred when Astyages sent a small cavalry force to intercept Cyrus, who was fleeing from Media back to Anshan. Cyrus, in response, sent word to Cambyses to mobilize some of the

Persian troops and send them to his aid at the city of Hyrba. There, the greatly outnumbered Median cavalry was quickly routed by the Persian forces. The battle, though small in and of itself, would be the beginning of the all out war between the Medes and the Persians that would result in the eventual downfall of the Median supremacy and the creation of the Persian empire.

Following Hyrba, both Astyages and Cyrus fully mobilized their armies. Astyages would go on the offensive, mounting an invasion of Persia that was meant to completely subjugate the Persians once more. Cyrus, by comparison, would begin the war as a defensive campaign, establishing his forces on the border between Media and Persia to protect his own lands against the invading forces of Astyages. These were the circumstances that eventually led to the second major battle of the Persian-Median war, which occurred in 551 BCE. This battle, known to modern historians simply as the Battle of the Persian Border, is also recorded in the histories of Nicolaus of Damascus. This time, both the Persians and the Medes would bring large forces to bear against each other, resulting in a full-scale battle, as opposed to the limited engagement at Hyrba.

This time, however, the Persians found themselves greatly outnumbered by the Medians. The Battle of the Persian border is thought to have been predominantly a cavalry engagement in which the two sides fought to keep the other from outmaneuvering them. The Medians would ultimately turn the flank of the Persian cavalry,

inflicting heavy losses on the Persians and fighting them to a standstill. The battle, however, is still frequently considered to have been a Persian victory, as Astyages and his forces were forced to stop their advance into Persian territory due to the massive number of casualties they sustained during the battle. The strategic losses that the Persians sustained during this battle, however, should not be underestimated. Forced to withdraw from the field, the forces of Cyrus would have suddenly faced an existential threat at the hands of Astyages once his armies had regrouped. It was also this battle that left Cyrus the Great as the one and only king of the Persians, as Cambyses I was wounded during the course of the fighting and later died.

Following the Battle of the Persian Border, the forces of Cyrus would have seemed to be in extreme danger of defeat. However, a revolution from within the army of Astyages himself would seal the victory of Cyrus over the Medes. This military revolt would be led by a defecting commander by the name of Harpagus. According to Herodotus, Harpagus was a Median commander whose son had been killed by Astyages, prompting him to seek revenge by defecting to Cyrus. This version of events is most likely apocryphal, as it is more likely that Harpagus simply saw better advancement in changing his allegiances and becoming the favored commander of Cyrus. With this development, the combined armies of Cyrus and Harpagus turned on the Medes, capturing their capital city of Ecbatana and looting it heavily of all of the valuables that Astyages had amassed there. This

capture of Ecbatana in 550 BCE, for all intents and purposes, ended the Median control of Iran and established the Persians as the new ruling kingdom.

This conquest of the Medes, however, was but the first step of the long journey that Cyrus the Great would undertake to create the largest land empire that the ancient world had ever seen. Immediately following the fall of Astyages, Cyrus would have had to manage the transition of power in Iran from the Medes to the Persians. In many ways, the Persian system copied the existing political systems that were left in place from the Median and Assyrian dominions of the area. Though Cyrus, as the king of Persia, would have been the most powerful man in the lands that he ruled, more local rulers would continue to administer the various lands that came under his control following the end of the Median supremacy. These regional governors, known as *satraps*, would become an integral part of the expansion of Persian power. By establishing regional spheres of authority, the Persian empire could effectively function as a cohesive political entity across massive distances without the need for direct intervention from the Achaemenid kings themselves, except in matters of imperial political or military policy. Indeed, many of the early *satraps* were members of the Achaemenid family who were not in line for succession to the kingship.

The next stage of the expansion of Persian power in the Near East would come in the form of a conflict with the kingdom of Lydia, in

modern Turkish Anatolia. This kingdom, which stretched beyond the western border of the Median lands, was ruled by the brother-in-law of Astyages, Croesus. For obvious reasons, Croesus' relations with Persia after the fall of Astyages were rocky at best. In an attempt to stop the growing power of Persia, Croesus decided that he would form an alliance to attack the new empire in the east and destroy it before its power grew too great. This alliance, which included Greeks, Egyptians and Babylonians, would prove to be almost entirely useless to Croesus. Sometime in or more likely after 547 BCE, the armies of Croesus crossed into the lands of the new Achaemenid Empire and there fought an indecisive battle known as the Battle of Pteria with the forces of Persia in the vicinity of the Halys River. This battle, though it did not produce a clear victor, forced Croesus to abandon his attack on Persia. The war he had started, however, would not remain across his borders. Soon, it would follow him home to Lydia.

With the end of the campaigning season as winter approached, Croesus returned to the Lydian capital of Sardis having accomplished very little in the field against the Persians. As a rule, wars in this part of the ancient world were not continued during the winter. However, in an unusual move, Cyrus pressed the campaign against Lydia through the cold season, taking advantage of the reduced military preparedness of his enemy. Before long, Cyrus had captured western Anatolia and subdued Sardis. What became of Croesus is not precisely known. According to some accounts which are very likely apocryphal, he was to be burned alive, but was spared by Cyrus at the last second,

becoming a principal adviser to the Achaemenid king afterward. More likely, Croesus was executed after the taking of Lydia.

As was common practice, Cyrus appointed a *satrap* for Lydia, in this case a man named Tabalus of whom very little is known beyond a few details of his governance of Lydia. However, Tabalus would soon find himself faced with a new revolution from pro-Lyidian forces led by Pactyes, a Lydian whom Cyrus had tasked with gathering up the immense wealth of Croesus (who had been renowned in the ancient world as one of the wealthiest of all kings) and conveying it back to Persia. Pactyes, however, betrayed Cyrus and used the treasury to rally an army to attempt to free Lydia from its new Persian overlords. Doubtlessly eager to put down this rebellion in short order, Cyrus sent a commander named Mazares to defeat the forces fielded by Pactyes. The army that had been assembled to drive the Persians from Lydia quickly proved to be no match for Mazares. Pactyes, in an attempt to escape the Persian lands, fled with what remained of his armies to the city-states of the Ionian Greeks, in the far west of modern-day Turkey. In his attempts to capture Pactyes, Mazares is known to have attacked the Ionians, and even to have captured much of the land that had once been held by them. This incident, though it must have seemed fairly minor at that time, would set the stage for the massive series of conflicts known as the Greco-Persian Wars that would, in time, set the Greeks and the Persians in direct conflict with each other.

After successfully capturing Pactyes, Mazares built on his successes

by conquering much of the rest of Asia Minor. However, though his additions to the Achaemenid Empire were numerous, he would not live to see the benefits of his service. Under circumstances that no known historical accounts record, Mazares died on campaign and before he could return to Persia. Harpagus, now the senior commander of the Persian armies, was sent by Cyrus to take his place. Taking over where Mazares had left off, Harpagus successfully conquered all of what is today Turkey. At the behest of Cyrus, who as a rule was generous to conquered adversaries, Harpagus waged an effective but not brutal campaign. Lands that were conquered became subordinate states to the Achaemenid Empire, but were treated well and generally allowed to keep a fairly high degree of local autonomy. This policy was an instrumental part of the method by which Cyrus established his empire, as it helped to prevent political tensions and national attitudes against the Persians from becoming major enough to inspire revolts.

With Asia Minor under his control and an empire that stretched from the Mediterranean in the west to the province of Bactria in modern-day Afghanistan (a kingdom that had been allied to the Medes before becoming part of the Persian empire after the fall of Astyages) in the east, Cyrus had already proven himself as one of the great kings of history. This massive land empire, created by one people under one ruler in the span of less than two decades, would have been one of the most remarkable accomplishments of empire building in the history of man even if the expansion had stopped here. However, there was one

thing still lacking for the empire of Cyrus the Great to become complete. Mesopotamia, the region that had spawned the earliest known civilizations of recorded history some 3,000 years earlier, would be this final great addition to the Achaemenid Empire under the rule of Cyrus.

The first part of the lands once belonging to the world's oldest civilizations to be annexed into the empire would be Elam, the ancient region in the extreme west of what is today Iran, along the Persian Gulf, that had been a hub of advanced civilization since the time of the Proto-Elamite culture, which is thought to have arisen around 3,400 BCE. While not itself a part of Mesopotamia, Elam had had long-standing association with the great powers of the Fertile Crescent from the earliest days of the Sumerian civilization through the time of the alternating Babylonian and Assyrian dominance of the region. Precisely how Elam was taken by the forces of the Achaemenid Empire is not presently known. Presumably, following the fall of the Medes, Elam (which had, after the fall of Assyria, become one of the vassal states of Media) regained independence. If this was the case, however, it would be a short-lived phenomenon. By around 539 BCE, Elam seems to have fallen completely under the control of Persia, though the heights of its history were already long behind it by this point. The last recorded native king of Elam was Tempti-Khumma-In-Shushinak, who came to power as the last of a series of short-reigning kings at the end of Elamite history. Although Elam would be brought into the new empire as a kingdom, its culture rapidly disappeared.

The Elamites soon adopted the culture of the Persians, bringing the history of Elam as a single distinct civilization to an abrupt close.

With Elam now under his control, Cyrus could mount an attack on the final great power that stood in opposition to Persian rule: the Neo-Babylonian Empire. After the death of Ashurbanipal and the subsequent breakup of the Neo-Assyrian Empire in the years that followed, the Babylonians, themselves an ancient people of Mesopotamia who had long been one of the great powers of the ancient world, formed their own empire from some of the lands that Assyria had once controlled. At its height, this newly reinvigorated Babylonian empire stretched outward from its heartland in what is today southern Iraq to include all of Assyria to its north and west, most of the lands directly westward to the Mediterranean, the island of Cyprus, much of the northern Arabian peninsula and the lands that today make up Israel, spanning almost to the Egyptian kingdom. Along with this renewal of Babylonian political and military power came a renewal of Babylonian culture. Pieces of art and architecture dating from earlier Babylonian times found new significance in the Neo-Babylonian Empire as a revived Babylon briefly dominated Mesopotamia.

This renewal, however, would not last. A Babylonian document known as the Nabonidus Chronicle details the end of the Neo-Babylonian Empire at the hands of Cyrus the Great. This record, named for the last king of the Neo-Babylonian Empire whose downfall

it covers, is one of very few contemporary records that has survived regarding the early years of the Achaemenid Empire, and certainly the most complete. The text is also an important document in confirming some of the accounts of later historians with regards to the sacking of Ecbatana and the subsequent military campaigns of Cyrus in Asia Minor. Toward the end of the portion of the tablet that has survived (the existing version is a lengthy fragment of what was once a much larger historical tablet), the Nabonidus Chronicle recounts the invasion of Mesopotamia by Cyrus, probably beginning in late 540 BCE but principally occurring in 539 BCE.

The chronicle does not record the exact details surrounding Cyrus' decision to invade Babylon. However, given the heavily expansionist character of the Persian empire under Cyrus, it is not unreasonable to assume that the motivation behind the invasion was simply the acquisition of more territory and the subjugation of the Persian empire's greatest regional competitor. The first recorded action taken by the Babylonians during the Persian invasion seems to have been to move the cult statues from the various temples across the Babylonian empire to the city of Babylon itself to prevent their capture by the invading Persian forces. Following this, the Babylonian armies mobilized to meet the armies of Cyrus in the field. The resulting conflict would culminate in a battle that would decide the fate of all of Mesopotamia.

This battle, known historically as the Battle of Opis, would occur in

September of 539 BCE near the city of Opis, which had long been an important administrative center for the region north of the city of Babylon. The details of the battle, regrettably, have not survived. The outcome, however, was nothing short of a massive victory on the part of the Persian forces, which seem to have almost entirely crushed the army that resisted their advance into Babylonian territory. Within a few days, the Persian forces had captured another major city, Sippar, after which they advanced on Babylon itself with little to no resistance from the native Babylonian population. Upon his conquest of Babylon, Cyrus the Great adopted the title “King of Sumer and Akkad,” an ancient title that had been used for over 1,500 years to convey dominance over Mesopotamia.

Following the annexation of the lands which had previously been a part of the Neo-Babylonian Empire into his own lands, the empire of Cyrus the Great reached the zenith of its power during his rule. In the 20 years that passed between the time when he assumed joint kingship with Cambyses I and the conquest of Babylon, Cyrus had assembled the many lands of the ancient east into a completely new empire ruled from the Persian lands of southwestern Iran. This mighty empire, which would be passed on to his descendants and reshape the entire world around it, was on a scale that few in the ancient world could ever have anticipated. However, even as he was building his massive empire, Cyrus had also undertaken a great building project in the form of a capital city to crown it.

This capital city was known as Pasargadae, and was built at a site near where the Battle of the Persian border had been fought during the rise of Cyrus. Some histories from the ancient world in fact claim that the battle took place at Pasargadae, but the fact that it was commissioned to be built by Cyrus later in his reign makes it much more likely that the settlement referred to in these histories was a smaller town or city at or very near the site that would later become Pasargadae. Although Pasargadae would become the prime center of power under Cyrus, the regional power hubs of Susa (capital of Elam) and Babylon would act as the centers for much of the empire.

Construction on the Achaemenid city of Pasargadae probably began in or around 546 BCE, shortly after Cyrus had freed Persia from Median domination. Though elements of the city may have been built before the time of Cyrus, possibly representing the smaller city that may have been present near the Battle of the Persian Border, there can be little doubt that the settlement was expanded massively during the rule of Cyrus. Archaeological excavations at the site have found inscriptions on the central palace complex of Pasargadae that definitively identify its builder as Cyrus the Great. There is also substantial evidence, mostly derived from the architecture of the city, that Pasargadae was a truly multinational city befitting the vast empire that it acted as the political center of. Influences of Greek, Assyrian, Babylonian and many other cultures can be seen in the palace and citadel of the city. This illustrates quite nicely a consistent theme in the history of the Achaemenid Empire. Rather than imposing

Persian civilization on the lands that were incorporated into the empire, the Achaemenids adopted cultural aspects from peoples all across the empire. The result was a unique blend of the many ancient lands and peoples that were combined under the power of Persia.

Of the later years of the life and rule of Cyrus, records are scarce. Indeed, even his death is only roughly documented. According to most versions of the story of his eventual death, Cyrus the Great died in battle, either against the Massagetae, a loose alliance of tribal groups in the steppes of central Asia, or against a small tribal rebellion in the north of Iran. Alternately, Cyrus has been said to have died at Pasargadae, though the circumstances of this version of the story are not well detailed. Whatever the cause, Cyrus is generally believed to have died in either 530 or 529 BCE. As a monument to the man who had single-handedly led Persia from humble roots as a minor kingdom under Median rule to the seat of the largest empire that the world had yet seen, a raised mausoleum was built just to the southwest of the palace at Pasargade. The tomb is comparatively modest, given the achievements of Cyrus, being little more than a free standing limestone building atop a tiered platform. According to records from the time of Alexander the Great's campaigns through Persia, the tomb once contained several golden treasures, as well as an epitaph inscription that claimed the tomb as the final resting place of Cyrus. One reported version of the epitaph of Cyrus, as recorded by Arrian, reads as follows:

Mortal, I am Cyrus, son of Cambyses, who founded the Persian empire and was king of Asia. Begrudge me not then this monument.

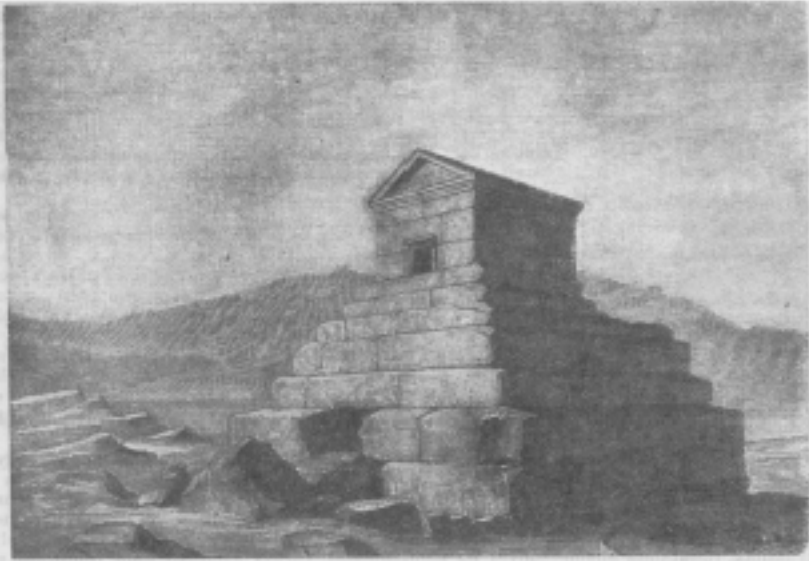


Illustration 3: A sketch of the tomb of Cyrus the Great.

Though Cyrus the Great had passed from the scene, the empire that he had created would long outlive him, and would continue to expand under those who followed him in the line of Achaemenid kings. The immediate successor of Cyrus II was Cambyses II, named for the father of Cyrus. There is some circumstantial evidence to suggest that, in his earlier years, Cambyses II was given authority over the Babylonian lands by Cyrus, though just how much practical political power he really had is a matter of scholarly debate. There can be no doubt, however, that when death removed Cyrus from the political scene, complete power over all of the lands that were now part of the

Achaemenid Empire would have been given over to Cambyses II.

Inspired by his father's success, Cambyses would continue to press the limits of Persian power into new lands.

By far the most important development that occurred during the reign of Cambyses II was the Persian effort to conquer Egypt, a kingdom that, much like Elam and the Mesopotamian lands, had long since passed the height of its power and influence, but which was still a major kingdom within the context of the ancient world. It is very likely that, prior to his own death, Cyrus had already been planning an invasion of Egypt, as control of the most powerful kingdom of northern Africa would have added greatly to the wealth and territory that was controlled by his empire. The actual task of conquering the Egyptians, however, would fall to Cambyses II.

In 525 BCE, either four or five years after Cambyses had come to power, the military expedition into Egypt would begin. At that time, Egypt was under the rule of the pharaohs of the Twenty-Sixth Dynasty. The last pharaoh of this line and the one who would face the Persian onslaught was Psamtik III, who had ascended to the throne of Egypt only about six months before the Persian invasion began. Unlike Psamtik, who would probably still have been in the process of organizing his kingdom under his command, Cambyses II was well prepared for the war between the two great superpowers. In order to facilitate his crossing of the arid lands that stood between his armies and the Egyptian heartland, Cambyses had solicited the support of the

native Arabs of the Sinai to provide his forces with water. He also had swayed the loyalties of Polycrates, the Greek ruler of Samos who had originally allied with Psamtik. With the intelligence and additional troops he was able to obtain from Polycrates, Cambyses would have had a notable strategic edge against the Egyptian army in the field. Another source of military intelligence for Cambyses was the former Egyptian military adviser Phanes of Halicarnassus, a Greek mercenary who had fallen out of favor with Amasis II, the father of Psamtik III, and had subsequently offered his services and expertise on Egyptian military tactics to the Persians.

The major battle of this Persian-Egyptian war occurred in May of 525 BCE at the northern Egyptian city of Pelusium, where the Egyptian armies would fortify themselves and attempt to stop the forces of Cambyses II before he could strike southward into the central portions of Egypt. Unfortunately, details of the tactics which were employed by both sides during the battle have not survived in full. According to one source, the later Macedonian writer and military commentator Polyaeus, the Persians may have gone into battle with cats accompanying the soldiers of the Persian cavalry. This, according to Polyaeus, prevented the Egyptians from using their archers against the Persians, as Egyptian religious belief held cats as an animal sacred to the goddess Bastet and therefore would not allow them to be harmed. Other sacred animals may also have been spread throughout the ranks of the Persian forces. However, Polyaeus is the only source that reports this strategy, and the extremely low likelihood of any

degree of religious belief (even in a civilization as deeply religious as that of ancient Egypt) preventing the Egyptians from defending their own homeland makes it very probable that this account is purely fictitious, intriguing strategy though it may be.

The result of the battle is known to have been a decisive victory for the forces of the Achaemenid Empire. The Greek historian and scholar Ctesias, who gained an extensive knowledge of the history of Persia by acting as personal physician to the later Achaemenid emperor Artaxerxes II, records that the losses suffered by the Egyptians numbered nearly 50,000, in comparison to a mere 7,000 on the side of the Persians. We must be wary of these numbers as exact statistics, but they certainly reflect the overall result of the battle. According to Herodotus, who would later visit the battleground at Pelusium, the fields outside the city were covered in bones and human remains.

Following Pelusium, Cambyses would have been able to press onward into Egyptian territory with very little to oppose him. Although Psamtik had lost the battle itself, he had managed to escape to Memphis, one of the ancient capital cities of Egypt, with what remained of the army he had fielded at Pelusium. The conquest of Egypt, however, was now inevitable. Soon, Cambyses had begun to march toward Memphis. After a request for the surrender had been denied (and, indeed, those carrying it executed by the Egyptians), the Persian army laid siege to Memphis. The Egyptian forces managed to hold out for some time, but without forces that could be used to break

through the numerically superior Persian lines or to turn the tide of the battle, the result of the siege was a foregone conclusion from its very beginning. Memphis eventually fell and Psamtik, the last pharaoh of his dynasty, was captured and imprisoned, though he would eventually be granted a degree of freedom under the careful observation of the Persians. He would die in this state, after unsuccessfully attempting to organize an Egyptian rebellion against the Achaemenid Empire.



Illustration 4: An image drawn from an ancient seal depicting the capture of Psamtik III at the hands of Cambyses II.

With the ending of the Twenty-Sixth Dynasty at the hands of Cambyses II, he and later Achaemenid emperors would assume yet another title of kingship: pharaoh of Egypt. Egypt would become an

important part of the Achaemenid Empire, though one that would prove a constant source of difficulty in the form of revolts and insurrection, one of which would pry Egypt back out of Achaemenid hands for a period of nearly 50 years later in Persian history. Indeed, these rebellions would start almost as soon as Persian rule of Egypt had been solidified. The earliest known revolution was led by Petubastis III, who may have become pharaoh for two years following the death of Cambyses II in 522 BCE. However, a more likely version of the history of this incredibly enigmatic figure (known to exist from only a handful of inscriptions), is that he claimed kingship for himself while the kingdom of Egypt, as a whole, was still generally under Achaemenid rule. His rebellion was short lived, as even if he did become the pharaoh of Egypt, he was deposed by 520 BCE.

Cambyses, doubtlessly pleased with his new acquisition, planned to expand upon it even further by launching new campaigns into the regions around Egypt. The first of these endeavors was a push southward into the Nubian kingdom of Kush, which itself had successfully conquered Egypt for a period of time a few centuries earlier, though its rule had eventually been broken by that of the Neo-Assyrian Empire. However, the supply lines of the Persian army had been stretched so far from its own regions of traditional support that a campaign into the arid and inhospitable region of Kush was simply impractical. The campaign was eventually abandoned, leaving Kush free from Achaemenid rule.

Another ill-fated venture of the Persian military after the successful conquest of Egypt involved a supposed attempt to capture the Siwa Oasis, home to the oracle of Amun. Though this oasis is in the extreme west of the modern-day country of Egypt, it would have been a part of Libyan territory in ancient times. Herodotus records an expedition of 50,000 soldiers (probably exaggerated) sent to attack and take Siwa. Before reaching the oasis, however, the massive army is supposed to have encountered an unusually vicious sandstorm which buried it completely. Over the years, many expeditions have been organized to search for archaeological evidence of this army. While there is every reason to believe that the army of Cambyses sent into Libya was probably drawn from historical reality, none of the archaeological finds that have purported to at last prove the existence of this military force have stood up to critical analysis by the scholarly community. One possibility, proposed in recent years, is that Petubastis III ambushed this army in the desert and defeated it as part of his rebellion. The story remains, however, as one of the most tantalizing mysteries of this period of history.

Cambyes II would not live long after this massive expansion of Persian territory. His death would come in 522 BCE during a strange and poorly understood period of revolution within the Persian empire itself. This revolt was either led by Bardiya, who was the younger son of Cyrus the Great and brother to Cambyes II, or someone who pretended to be Bardiya. According to some sources, including the Behistun Inscription (discussed earlier), a Persian priest, or *magus*,

named Gaumata impersonated the real Bardiya, who had been secretly killed at the order of Cambyses II before he left for Egypt. A section of the inscription detailing the rebellion of Gaumata reads as follows:

He lied to the people, saying "I am Bardiya, son of Cyrus, brother of Cambyses. Then were all the people in revolt...he seized the kingdom. Afterwards, Cambyses died of natural causes.

Modern historians have questioned the validity of this account, based on the fact that it was written under the rule of Darius I, the immediate successor to Cambyses II after the brief period of rule of Bardiya (or his imposter) after his period of some months on the throne. Several elements of the story seem questionable. In particular, the idea that someone else had assumed the role of a secretly assassinated Bardiya seems unlikely. More likely is the possibility that the real Bardiya revolted and that the alleged history of an imposter was fabricated *post hoc* by Darius in order to legitimize his own rule. The circumstances of the death of Cambyses have also been hotly debated, both in ancient and modern times.

Just as the death of Cambyses is questionable, so is the location of his tomb. At the moment, the most likely final resting place for the second Achaemenid emperor is a ruined tower-like structure in Pasargadae, not too far from the tomb of Cyrus the Great. Other sites throughout the heartland of the Persian empire have also been suggested, though there is no definitive evidence to identify any of

them as the true tomb of Cambyses. The one point of agreement between the many competing theories is that wherever he really died, his body was conveyed back to somewhere in modern-day Iran for burial.

Though brief, the reign of Cambyses II had seen a great expansion of the empire in the conquest of Egypt. Much like his illustrious father, Cambyses had pushed the borders of his empire even farther away from the Persian homeland in what is today Iran and successfully incorporated the last of the great kingdoms of the ancient Near East that had stood outside the Achaemenid Empire into his holdings. With his death, however, the empire found itself at a crossroads. Actively ruling was Bardiya, a usurper and possibly even an imposter from outside of the royal family. With this development, the chain of Achaemenid kings seemed to have fallen into the perennial trap of great empires throughout history of internal power struggles undermining the power of the state. However, another Achaemenid, this time not descended directly from Cyrus but from an earlier branching off of the family, would soon assume control of the great empire and push it to even greater heights, leading it into the greatest period of Achaemenid power.

Section Three

The Height of the Achaemenid Empire

Though not a son of Cambyses II, Darius I was closely related to the previous Achaemenid kings. His father, Hystaspes, in addition to having been the *satrap* of the eastern province of Bactria, was the grandson of Ariaramnes, the brother of Cyrus I. As such, Darius was himself descended from the Achaemenid line and even may have had the closest claim on the throne of Persia, provided that no sons or brothers of Cambyses II came before him. The latter fact is probably the reason that he would later attempt to portray Bardiya as having died during the reign of Cambyses and then having been replaced by Gaumata.



Illustration 5: A sketch of a relief of Darius the Great, taken from his tomb.

At the time of the death of Cambyses II, Darius is thought to have been a lance-bearer in the Persian military, probably assigned to the personal guard of Cambyses. After Cambyses died, however, Darius would make the decision to oust Bardiya and take the kingship for himself. It is possible, though purely speculative, that the unexpected death of Cambyses II may have even been the work of Darius, as it would have cleared a path for him to seize power over the

Achaemenid Empire from the rebelling Bardiya. With the support and aid of six of the major nobles of the empire, Darius sought out Bardiya at a fortress in Media called Sikayauvatis and assassinated him, thereby becoming the new emperor and the ruler of the many lands that had been conquered by his predecessors. His coronation is believed to have taken place very shortly after the assassination at the Persian capital of Pasargadae.

Upon coming to power, Darius faced a series of revolts from the many nations that had been forced into the empire that would have threatened to undermine its entire structure. While some historians have attributed these revolts either to lingering support for Bardiya or to the possible illegitimacy of Darius, it is more likely that they were simply the product of national sentiment which inclined toward independence from the Persians. While the Achaemenids were generally tolerable overlords, it would have been extremely surprising had at least some of the Persian vassal states not attempted to take advantage of the instability caused by the death of Cambyses II and the assassination of Bardiya to regain their autonomy.

By the end of 522 BCE, both Elam and Babylonia were in a full-scale revolution against the Achaemenid Empire. The Behistun Inscription names Assina as the king who took control of Elam and Nidintu-Bel as the revolutionary king of Babylon. Nidintu-Bel, however, is better known as Nebuchadnezzar III (the inscription claims that he, like Bardiya, was an imposter posing as Nebuchadnezzar, but in this case,

there is no reliable context or history given to support the claim). Darius chose first to deal with Elam, a military necessity given its close proximity to Persia itself.

Darius moved quickly, likely to avoid the drawn-out struggle that might have ensued had the new kings in Elam and Babylon been given the time to secure themselves in power. The immediate move was, however, risky for Darius as well. Having only just retaken the empire by killing his predecessor, his position was quite precarious. Regardless, the swift attack on the Elamites and Babylonians proved to be a massive success. Apparently, Darius sent an army into Elam which quickly put down the rebellion under Assina and put him to death while he himself prepared to lead forces into Babylonian territory to attack Nebuchadnezzar III. The attack against the Babylonian army, too, would come swiftly. Nebuchadnezzar is known to have taken control of Mesopotamia in October of 522, and by December the armies of Babylon and Persia did battle on the banks of the Tigris river, one of the two great rivers of Mesopotamia. Soon, the new Babylonian king was forced back to his capital, which Darius besieged. Babylon eventually fell, leading to the execution of Nebuchadnezzar III and the reincorporation of Babylonia into the Achaemenid Empire.



Illustration 6: A sketch of the Behistun Inscription and its accompanying reliefs. This inscription is the primary source for the events of the early reign of Darius I.

Although the new conquest of Babylon was a sweeping success, Darius' fragile position at home proved to work to his disadvantage. New revolutions against his power broke out in Elam, Media, Assyria, Egypt, Parthia (a province in northeastern Iran that would itself one day be the center of an Iranian empire), Margiana (part of the eastern province of Bactria), Sattagydia (a far eastern part of the empire in what is today Pakistan, mentioned for the first time in the section of the Behistun Inscription dealing with these revolts), Scythia (central Asia) and even in Persia itself. These renewed revolts would have posed a significant danger to Darius, as they were widespread enough to make putting them down all at once next to impossible. The second Elamite revolt largely ended itself, as the Elamites overthrew their new king in favor of Darius. The rest of the rebellions, however, would take years for Darius to put down. From the end of the first

Babylonian rebellion in 522 BCE until about 516 BCE, Darius would be engaged in a nearly constant struggle to put down the insurrections against him and to solidify Persian control over the massive Achaemenid Empire.

During his first few years, it may have been difficult to imagine Darius ever being able to secure his power over the territories conquered by Cyrus the Great and Cambyses II. By 516, however, he had not only accomplished this difficult task, but was once again expanding his empire into new lands. In 518, while putting down the rebellions in the far east, the armies of Darius had captured the region that is today eastern Pakistan, opening up a route to India via the passes of the Hindu Kush mountains. Now secure in his power throughout his empire, Darius could add the wealthiest regions of the east to his ever-growing kingdom. Eventually, he would push his borders as far east as the valley of the Indus River, installing new *satraps* to govern the farthest reaches of his empire while he, in short order, prepared to also move the northern and western borders of the Achaemenid Empire into new lands.

Since the time of Cyrus the Great, the Scythians, a group of tribes situated in central Eurasia and with territory spanning as far as eastern Europe, had been a problem for the Persian empire. Some accounts of the death of Cyrus would have it that he died in battle with Scythian tribesmen, though this is far from definitive. During the many rebellions that plagued the early years of Darius I, the Scythians

had even waged a series of border wars against their Persian enemies, likely intended to ensure that the Achaemenid Empire did not continue its expansion into Scythian lands, some of which it had already conquered. However, the attacks would have just the opposite effect. In order to keep his territory secure and to stop the Scythians from posing any further difficulty for him, Darius launched a full-scale invasion against the Scythian tribes sometime beginning in or around 513 BCE.

This campaign into the Scythian territories would take Darius into modern Russia and Ukraine, where the Scythian tribes were centered, after he crossed the Bosphorus Straits. Once in Scythian territory, however, Darius would encounter a problem that has repeatedly faced the kings of mighty civilizations who have chosen to do battle with less organized tribes throughout history. The Scythians, having no great cities or centers of regional power and relying on an almost entirely clannish organizational system, could not be forced into an all-out battle. Had the Scythians chosen to engage the Persians in a set battle, they certainly would have been overwhelmed by the size and experience of the Persian army. Instead, they chose to withdraw away from the army of Darius, doing everything they could to make the land inhospitable for the invading army. Darius would succeed in taking much territory from the Scythians before eventually building a series of forts to mark the boundaries of his new lands and to keep the Scythians from attempting to reclaim what they had lost. However, since the Scythian king Idanthyrus, who was the leader of the

Scythian tribes at that time, refused to engage Darius in the field, the Achaemenid emperor was unable to secure a decisive victory against the Scythians.

The invasion of Scythia, however, would soon take the Persians one more step toward their impending confrontation with the city-states of ancient Greece. After having decided to stop his pursuit of the Scythians in their own lands, Darius would decide to annex Thrace, an ancient region just to the north of modern-day Greece and bordering on modern Bulgaria. Though not Greeks themselves, the Thracians held close ties to Greece, and both the Thracian lands and population would be instrumental for the Persian empire during its attempted invasion of Greece, which would not be long in coming. This conquest of Thrace would ultimately set the stage for the first Persian invasion of Greece, though it would take other events to make that invasion inevitable.

For many years following the conquest of Thrace, Greece and Persia pursued more or less peaceful relations. Greeks were welcome in the Achaemenid Empire, and both the Persians and the Greek city-states benefited from the exchange of goods and ideas that occurred under this amicable climate. However, these conditions would not last long. In 500, the Persian-installed tyrant of the city of Miletus, named Aristogoras, was asked by exiled citizens of the island of Naxos to conquer the island and add it to his own territory. Aristogoras, however, did not have the military capability for such a campaign. In

order to make the conquest possible, he requested assistance from Artaphernes, who was at that time the *satrap* of the Lydian lands and also the brother of Darius I. However, the Persians were less dedicated to the endeavor than was Aristogoras, and the limited fleet supplied by Artaphernes for the expedition was eventually withdrawn.

Aristogoras, having failed the Persians and fearful of being deposed at the order of Darius, incited the Ionian Greeks, who had been incorporated into the empire during the rule of Cyrus the Great, to revolt. The move would prove disastrous and would set the Persian empire and the Greek city-states on a course of conflict that could not be departed from. Aristogoras, needing allies in the fight against the massive empire of which his city had previously been a part, went to the independent city-states of Greece to seek assistance. Both Athens and Eretria agreed to support the Ionians. In 498 BCE, the combined forces of Athens and Eretria attacked and burned Sardis, the regional capital from which Artaphernes exerted control over Lydia. Upon receiving word from Sardis of the attack, the Persian forces throughout Asia Minor mobilized and marched to Sardis to pursue a counterattack. The resulting battle was known as the Battle of Ephesus, the city from which the Athenian-led forces had marched on Sardis. Already tired from the attack on the capital of Artaphernes, the Greek forces were almost entirely routed by the fresh Persian troops. The attack on Sardis and the subsequent Battle of Ephesus are generally considered the opening military actions of the Greco-Persian Wars.

The loss of Sardis was a humiliating incident for the Achaemenid Empire, and Darius would not soon forgive it. Upon learning that the Athenians had attacked an imperial city, Darius is said to have assigned one of his servants to remind him of their actions at every meal so that his hatred of them could not dull with time. Darius, the undisputed ruler of most of the known civilized world at the time, had sworn that he would have revenge on the Greeks. The Persian forces in the western empire would be occupied with retaking the lands that were in revolt from the time of the Battle of Ephesus in 498 BCE until about 493 BCE when the last of the rebelling cities were finally defeated. After Ephesus, Athens had no further involvement in the Ionian Revolt, but Darius would keep his word to launch an attack on Greece within a year of the final military operations against the Ionians.

Beginning in early 492 BCE, a Persian force under the command of Mardonius, likely one of the highest commanders in the military besides Darius himself and also the emperor's own son-in-law, made its way toward Greece by way of the Thracian provinces. Thrace had, during the time of the Ionian Revolt, become semi-autonomous once again, and this army reasserted control over the Thracian lands as it moved through them. The Persian army also secured the loyalty of Macedon, which had earlier willingly submitted itself to rule by the Achaemenid Empire. However, two events would combine in favor of the Greeks to halt the army of Mardonius in its tracks before it ever

entered the Greek mainland. While in Macedon, the army was ambushed in its camp at night by a rebellious Thracian tribe, resulting in disproportionately high casualties. During the fighting, Mardonius himself was injured, though his wounds would not prove to be fatal. Shortly before this incident occurred, the Persian fleet that had been sent to make its way to the Greek coastline to aid Mardonius in his conquest of Greece ran ashore during a fierce storm and was bashed to pieces against the rocks of the peninsula surrounding Mount Athos. With his fleet all but entirely destroyed and his army not ready for the invasion, Mardonius returned to more friendly territory in Turkey. The first attempt at an invasion had failed, but it would not be the last.

The following year, Darius sent an offer to the city-states of Greece to willingly subordinate themselves to Persian rule. This was not an uncommon practice in Persia, as many kingdoms wished to avoid the devastating cost in resources and human life that a war with the Achaemenid emperor would bring. Those states that did wish to willingly become part of the empire were asked to send a symbolic offering of earth and water to Persia, and it was this offering that Darius requested from the Greeks. Though several cities did agree, both Athens and Sparta refused, and with Sparta went an alliance of city-states in the south of Greece known as the Peloponnesian League. With the two most powerful city-states in Greece standing against him, including the one against which he sought revenge, Darius was left with no choice but to pursue a second invasion.

In 490 BCE, another combined naval and land assault was mounted. This time, the campaign would be led by Artaphernes (confusingly enough, the son of the Lydian *satrap* Artaphernes and therefore the nephew of Darius), with a Median admiral named Datis commanding the fleet that was sent to support the army. Moving through the Aegean Sea, this force attacked several of the islands that had not yet been completely annexed into the empire and laid siege to the city of Eretria. The siege would last for six days, until the city was betrayed by two pro-Persian citizens who opened the gates and allowed the enemy army access to the city. Eretria was almost completely destroyed, and its citizens were enslaved for their role in the burning of Sardis. Such almost certainly would have been the fate of Athens, had Darius managed to conquer it. However, the tide of the war would soon turn in one of the most famous battles of the ancient world.

After its attack on Eretria, the Persian fleet headed south toward Athens, landing at a harbor known as Marathon about 25 miles away from the city itself. An Athenian force, upon hearing where the Persian fleet was disembarking, rallied an army and marched to the site as quickly as possible in an attempt to keep the Persian forces contained. Successfully blocking the army from leaving the plains on which it had assembled, the Athenians waited for the army of Sparta, by far the more powerful land army, to arrive. However, the Spartans were, at that time, observing a religious festival called the *Carnea* during which Spartan law would permit no army to march, delaying

the arrival of the Spartans for as long as 10 days. For the first five days, the two armies held position. However, the Battle of Marathon would begin before Sparta could send reinforcements. On the fifth day, the Athenians attacked the Persians, and the battle for all of Greece started.

The Persians would have greatly outnumbered the Greek forces, though most of the ancient sources regarding the size of the Persian army at Marathon are believed by modern scholars to be greatly exaggerated. However, the Battle of Marathon would prove for the first time a fact that would impact the Persians negatively at every battle they ever fought with the Greeks: the superiority of the heavy infantry traditionally used by the Greeks. Greek soldiers, known as hoplites, fought in heavy bronze armor and carried large shields, spears for long-distance thrusting and short swords that could be used for close quarters combat. By comparison, the Persian military specialized in the use of light infantry and cavalry for swift strikes against their opponents. The Greek hoplites proved to be overwhelming for the Persian lines. Advancing toward the Persians, the Athenian force likely would have kept a close-rank formation until closing in on the Persian line and breaking into a full run against its enemy. The wall of Greek hoplites, heavily armored and well-disciplined, caught the much lighter Persian soldiers off guard and forced them back. The flanks quickly gave way, followed by the disintegration of the center of the line. In an attempt to return to their ships, the Persians suffered massive casualties but managed to escape.

The battle was considered to have been an overwhelming victory for the Greeks, who had successfully defended their borders and driven the Persian army back to Asia. Though this would not be the last Greece would see of its new enemy, it had scored a decisive win and one that proved that a Persian force could be beaten.

It is important, however, to remember the extent of the Achaemenid Empire at this point. In the context of a land empire so large, wealthy and populous, the defeat at Marathon meant virtually nothing outside of Greece. Indeed, Darius soon began to assemble another invasion force that would dwarf the size of his previous two attempts. This time, the invasion would be planned and executed much more thoroughly and would be led by Darius himself, an experienced military commander from his time in the army of Cambyses II and the many subsequent wars he had had to fight to secure and expand his power. However, the great emperor would meet his end before this third expedition could be launched.

During his later years, however, Darius the Great continued his work to make his empire the greatest that the ancient world could conceive of. To this end, he embarked on a series of building projects throughout the empire. The greatest of these were in Pasargadae, where he completed many of the projects that had been started by Cyrus the Great and Cambyses II but never finished due to the instability that followed, and in the new capital that Darius had begun for himself: Persepolis. This capital, located in the heart of the Persian

homeland in modern-day Iran, was built on a natural terrace that was artificially built up and leveled off to accommodate the city. Stairs provided access to this raised terrace from the lower areas surrounding it, and the city itself was designed from its very earliest stages to show the splendor of the empire and the wealth and power of the Achaemenids. Grand halls, palaces and other showpieces of architecture would have reminded every visitor to the city, from visiting kings and *satraps* to lower citizens, that they were in the center of the greatest empire that the ancient world had ever produced.

Construction at Persepolis is thought to have begun in about 515 BCE, though the city would not be fully complete until long after Darius himself had passed from the scene. Persepolis shows architectural influence from around the empire, much as Pasargadae had. Elements of Mesopotamian décor and architecture can be readily seen, as even the terrace upon which Persepolis sits is heavily reminiscent of the ziggurats of ancient Sumer, Babylon and Assyria. Also present from this Mesopotamian influence were friezes which are stylistically very much owing to Assyrian art, as well as several *lammasus* (sphinx-like depictions of winged bulls with human faces common in Mesopotamian art). The great capital also made use of the materials of the empire in its construction. The architecture of Persepolis displays the use of relatively small columns in the palaces and halls, used to give the impression of larger spaces to those within. More impressive perhaps, most of these columns were made of wood,

rather than of stone. Teak imported from India and cedar wood from Lebanon (famous for its cedar forests) were the favored woods for these columns, though stone columns were used in some of the larger buildings where structural integrity would have required more substantial supports.



Illustration 7: A column showing Persian soldiers in relief at the city of Persepolis.

In addition to demonstrating the immense power and wealth of the Achaemenid Empire, the city of Persepolis would serve another function. Near the newly-built capital are the tombs of Darius the Great and three of his successors. These tombs are cut into the solid rock of the Naqsh-e Rostam necropolis site, an ancient burial ground

about seven miles from the site of Persepolis itself. The site shows signs of use dating back into Iran's Elamite period, but by far its most important use was as a burying ground for the kings of the Achaemenid Empire. Kings of later Persian empires would also make their own additions to the site in the form of great relief sculptures in the rock surrounding the tombs of the Achaemenid kings.

The life of Darius the Great would close with a revolution in Egypt in 486 BCE, the last of the many revolts his reign of 36 years would see. This revolt took his attention away from the war against Greece, but it would not be he that put it down. Already in fragile health, Darius died soon after the uprising in Egypt had begun. With the death of Darius, the competition among the members of the Achaemenid family would once again come to the forefront of Persian political life. While he had been preparing to put down the Egyptian revolt, Darius had named his son Xerxes as his chosen successor should he die in the attempt. However, after the death of Darius, his eldest son Artabazenes tried to lay claim to the throne. While his claim was valid by right of being the first-born son of the previous ruler, Xerxes had little difficulty in solidifying his own claim to leadership of the Achaemenid Empire due to two important qualifications. The first was that he had been chosen by his father as his default successor before the Egyptian campaign that did not occur due to the death of Darius, indicating that the previous king had intended for Xerxes, not Artabazenes, to rule after him. The second, and more important, qualification was that Xerxes was the son of Darius by a woman

named Atossa, herself an Achaemenid and the daughter of Cyrus the Great. Respect for Cyrus in the Achaemenid Empire was so great that Xerxes' claim to power by right of blood descent from the original emperor of Persia completely overruled Artabazenes' birthright. In late 486 BCE (probably in either November or December of that year), Xerxes the Great took his place as the fourth great king of the Achaemenid Empire.

Though his father's wish for revenge against the Greeks was still a priority for Xerxes, who was probably already in his mid-30s by the time he ascended to power, he would have to first put down two revolts within lands he already controlled. Following the lead of the Egyptians, the Babylonians had begun their own revolt against the Achaemenid Empire in the wake of the death of Darius. It would take Xerxes much of 485 BCE to accomplish this end. However, he would begin to employ tactics that had thus far been avoided in the course of Persian history. During the reigns of Cyrus, Cambyses and Darius, military action could be swift and violent both in wars of conquest and in the putting down of revolts. Great care, however, was always taken not to destroy potentially valuable assets and not to anger indigenous populations unnecessarily, as doing so could lead to further revolts with more popular support. Xerxes seems to have abandoned this theory, at least to some degree, as evidenced by his actions upon the retaking of Babylon. The city had long been in possession of a golden idol of the god Marduk which played an important role in Babylonian religious festivals. For their rebellion

against the empire, Xerxes had this important religious icon seized and melted down, depriving the Babylonians of one of the most critical symbols of their religious system. This action instilled a hatred for Xerxes in the Babylonian population that would continue on throughout his entire reign.

With the Egyptian and Babylonian rebellions quelled, Xerxes turned his eyes to Greece, where he would personally lead the campaign that his father had so long planned. This campaign, in terms of its size and logistics, would truly be one of the most incredible military undertakings in human history. Not only would an immense army be assembled to invade the Greek mainland, but provisions and support for this massive force would have to be provided. Some ancient sources, doubtlessly trying to convey the sheer enormity of this invasion force, estimate the number of soldiers in the army of Xerxes that attacked Greece at as high as two million. This, of course, had been dismissed by modern scholars as an exaggeration. There is extensive debate as to how large the Persian forces really were, but even the most conservative modern estimates peg the strength of the army at a quarter of a million, with half a million being more generally agreed upon (this includes the various support positions and the crews of the many ships that carried the troops of Xerxes, not just infantry and cavalry soldiers).

In addition to readying the troops, ships and provisions for this invasion, Xerxes would also commission his builders and engineers to

facilitate the movement of his army into Greece. To allow the land forces to move, a massive pair of pontoon bridges would be built across the Hellespont, or Dardanelles, a strait that separates Asia Minor from Europe. This would save his army the long roundabout march and supply a direct route into the territories immediately to the north of Greece. Meanwhile, an even more ambitious project was planned to allow the movement of the Persian naval fleet. To avoid the problem that the fleet had encountered of rounding the rocky coastlines between Greece and Turkey during the invasion led by Mardonius in the reign of Darius the Great, a massive canal would be dug across the peninsula of Mount Athos. This would allow the Persian fleet to sail through a stable body of water rather than risk destruction rounding the treacherous peninsula. Via this canal and the bridge that spanned the Hellespont, the full military force of the Achaemenid Empire would be able to circumvent two of the natural defenses that made Greece difficult for an invading army to access. In 480 BCE, this army began to move, setting in motion the events that would lead to the greatest battles between the Greeks and the Persians.

Though the Persian invasion was extensively planned, the length of the preparation time would also work against Xerxes. The Greeks, particularly the Athenians under the guidance of a noted general named Themistocles, had been preparing for another Persian invasion since the first attack under Mardonius had been repelled by sheer good fortune on their part. Thus, when the Persian army was moving

toward Greece, the enemies of the Achaemenid Empire were as ready as they could possibly be to do battle with the greatest force in the world. The city-states of Athens and Sparta had established a strategic alliance that would be used to block the Persian advance into the southern portions of what is today Greece, the northern regions already having been conquered by the Persians or willingly submitting to them.

The result of this blocking action would be perhaps the best-known battle in Greek history, that of the pass of Thermopylae. The pass, situated between high mountains on one side and the sea on the other, provided the Greek forces the perfect choke point at which to halt the Persian advance. The plans of the alliance were that Athens, with its larger fleet, would do battle with the fleet of Xerxes while the Spartans and their allies would use their superior land force to stop the Persian infantry in its advance. As the army of Xerxes advanced, however, Sparta once again found itself in a difficult situation, as the *Carneia* was once again occurring. Though the strict laws of Sparta prevented the main army from marching until the religious festival had concluded, the threat from the army of the Achaemenid Empire was too great for even Sparta to ignore. Thus, a compromise was hit upon in which one of the two kings of Sparta, Leonidas, would take his personal guard, known as the *hippeis*, to Thermopylae to support the allied states with the most elite unit of the Spartan army. When the army commanded by Xerxes approached the narrow passageway, they found it blocked by a Spartan-led army of some 6-7,000 heavily

armored Greek hoplites.

The Battle of Thermopylae took place in a narrow corridor of land that offered its defenders a terrain advantage. In such a small space, the enormous numeric superiority of the army of Xerxes was substantially mitigated. The differences in military tactics between the two armies also favored the Greeks. Spartan soldiers fought by establishing a close-rank line of battle known as a phalanx that could then be protected by shields and spears at its front, making penetrating the line very difficult for an attacking force. This defensive tactic was augmented by the heavy bronze armor and shields favored by the Greeks. Conversely, the Persian military was given to the use of lightly armored soldiers and light cavalry. This latter difference, which had made itself quite apparent at Marathon, would only be amplified by the enclosed nature of the battle of Thermopylae and the fact that the Greeks, led by the incredibly well-trained Spartans, were taking a defensive position.

Before engaging with the Greeks at Thermopylae, Xerxes sent an envoy with an offer for Leonidas, who had taken personal command of the Greek allies there. This messenger offered generous rewards for the Greek soldiers blocking the pass and the city-states they represented if they would abandon their position and submit to the rule of the Achaemenid Empire. Xerxes, though militaristic, was well known for having used such diplomatic agreements throughout his reign, as his predecessors had done. Often, it was found that kingdoms

and city-states would willingly agree to Persian rule, especially once a Persian army was close at hand. Such arrangements also benefited the empire, as states that submitted without a fight would come in to it with less resentment that might incite future rebellions and as economically viable parts of the empire, rather than ruined lands that needed time to rebuild before they could be of use to the Achaemenids. However, Leonidas and the rest of the Greek army gathered at Thermopylae refused the offer, likely suspecting that Xerxes, much like his father, would take personal revenge on the Greek city-states for their defiance (as in the case of Eretria, where the populous had been enslaved and their city destroyed). With his first offer refused, Xerxes offered once more to allow the Greeks to leave peacefully, sending a second message that was little more than a command to the Greeks to lay down their arms. Doubtlessly, Xerxes was eager to avoid the battle if diplomacy could have prevailed. The pass and the strong defense of the Greeks guaranteed high casualties if his army engaged there. However, after the second offer was again refused by Leonidas, it became clear that there was no other way for the Persian army to proceed than to attack the Greek lines head-on.

The first day of actual battle came on five days after the Persian army had reached Thermopylae. As part of a very common tactic that was often used by the army of the Achaemenid Empire to weaken enemy forces before an infantry or cavalry engagement, the archers commanded by Xerxes shot massive barrages of arrows into the Greek lines before the beginning of the battle. However, thanks to the heavy

armor of the hoplites, this tactic proved to be almost completely ineffective. For much of the remainder of the first day of the battle, Xerxes would send unit after unit of light infantry against the Greek line, losing thousands of soldiers in the process while the Greeks experienced only very modest casualties. Even with his army's vast numeric superiority, Xerxes was unable to do serious damage to the line of Greek soldiers blocking the pass, let alone break it.

Eventually, likely toward the end of the first day's battle, Xerxes is said to have committed an elite infantry force that is a matter of great debate in the study of Achaemenid Persian history. According to Herodotus, this force was known as the Immortals, owing to the fact that every man in it who died or retired was replaced immediately to maintain a constant strength of 10,000. If Herodotus is to be believed, this force was the elite unit of the Persian army, though it was still a light infantry unit equipped and trained more for speed than for heavy fighting against forces such as that of the Greeks. It is widely believed that the Immortals as described by Herodotus were a unit assigned to whatever Achaemenid was the king of the Persian empire at the time. Thus, either the same unit or one very much like it probably accompanied Cyrus the Great, Cambyses II and Darius the Great in their military expeditions. These elite soldiers, armed with short spears and swords, light and flexible scale armor and wicker shields, would likely have been the best chance Xerxes had for breaking the Greek line with a frontal assault.

When the Immortals were committed to the battle, however, they quickly encountered the same difficulties that had been faced by their less prestigious counterparts. Though the elite force of the Persian army would certainly have been a formidable one, the surviving accounts of the Battle of Thermopylae suggest that they had little more luck in their attack of the Greek line than the previous infantry units. The force was not entirely destroyed, as it was once again deployed on the second and third days of the battle, but it is likely that it encountered very heavy losses before eventually withdrawing.

At this juncture, Xerxes must have been considering his options with regards to circumventing the pass. Certainly, there were other ways that he could move his army into southern Greece, but any one of them would have exposed his army to extensive risk of attack and taken much more time. Had he continued to attack the pass, it is likely that he would have eventually prevailed, but the cost in the lives of his soldiers would have been too high for him to accept in a battle that gained him nothing more than access to the lands he wished to conquer. However, Xerxes would soon be made aware of a critical piece of intelligence that he had previously lacked about the terrain surrounding the pass. After beginning his attack anew on the second day with as little success of the first, the Achaemenid Emperor was told of a route through the mountains that bordered one side of the pass that would allow him to move troops behind the Greek lines. This road, though guarded, was much more accessible than the pass itself and could be easily navigated. Xerxes deployed Hydarnes, one of

his top commanders and the the son of an important *satrap* of the same name who was one of the nobles that had assisted Darius I in killing Bardiya, to lead an infantry force made up of regular units and the remainder of the Immortals to flank the pass and encircle the Greeks.

The road that led above Thermopylae was known to the Greek forces and had been guarded by a force from the city of Phocis. As the force commanded by Hydarnes approached early in the third day of the battle, however, the Phocians took up defensive positions on a hill near the path, believing that the Persians would engage them there. This tactic left the road that led around the pass completely open, allowing Hydarnes to pass unchallenged by simply using his archers to keep the Phocians from moving from the position they had taken. From this point on, the Battle of Thermopylae took on the nature of a Persian victory as a foregone conclusion.

When told of the failure of his Phocian allies to hold their position, Leonidas ordered the forces that had come from the other city-states to withdraw, reserving only his own Spartan *hippeis* to take a last stand against the army of Xerxes that would allow the other Greek forces to avoid the impending slaughter. Some soldiers from other cities disobeyed and remained behind, but the majority of the Greek army moved away from Thermopylae to regroup and fight again another day. The last stand of the Spartans under Leonidas against the massive army of Achaemenid Persia has become one of the best-

known moments in the military history of the world. Attacking from both sides, the forces of Xerxes rapidly broke the Spartan line which before had held against every force that had been thrown against it. The Spartans eventually broke the line that blocked the pass and withdrew to a small hill which is today called Kolonos Hill nearby, where the final moments of the battle took place. The Persian archers, which before had been ineffective against the Spartans, were able to close in and blanket the entire hill with volley after volley of arrows. The closer proximity and the fact that the Greeks were no longer organized in close ranks made the archers more effective. Soon, all of the 300 men of Sparta, as well as their attendants, who had accompanied Leonidas to Thermopylae were dead and the pass of Thermopylae was left fully open to the Persian army, which continued its march southward.

Though Xerxes had won the battle, he had sustained losses much higher than he had expected. It was clear that the Greeks would be able to defend themselves quite effectively against his massive force. However, this would not stop the emperor who ruled most of the known world from pressing his invasion of the Greek mainland. At the same time that the Battle of Thermopylae had been occurring, the fleet of Xerxes had been engaged with the Athenian-led Greek allied fleet in the Straits of Artemisium. Though the three-day naval battle there came at a great cost to both fleets, the Greek navy was eventually forced to withdraw to Salamis, an island closer to Athens. This left a water route toward the south and toward Athens seemingly

open to the victorious Persian fleet. At this point, though Xerxes had sustained drastically high casualties at Thermopylae, it must have appeared to him and his commanders as if the invasion could not fail.

The land army under Xerxes moved into the regions of Greece that lay past Thermopylae, taking complete control of the major region known as Boetia.. The city of Athens was entirely evacuated, as it was known that Xerxes' invasion was driven by a desire for the revenge his father had so long sought against the Athenians for their role in the burning of Sardis years before. At the same time, the Spartans and their allies within the Peloponnesian League prepared to defend the extreme south of Greece against the invading Persians as best they could.

However, a turning point in the war would soon come in the form of a second naval battle between the fleets of the Achaemenid Persia and Greece.

This battle, known as the Battle of Salamis, probably occurred about one month after the simultaneous battles at Thermopylae and Artemisium, after the Greek fleet had helped in the evacuation of the city of Athens. Themistocles successfully lured the Persian fleet into the narrow Straits of Salamis, in which the number of the Persian ships was less useful than it would have been in an open-water naval battle. Though the details of the battle are less than certain, it is known that it was a general victory on the side of the Greek fleet. The Persians probably lost between one third and one half of their overall fleet, a blow that would have severely impeded the invasion efforts.

Between the high casualties at Thermopylae and the loss of many of his ships at Salamis, it would certainly have become clear to Xerxes that Greece would not have been a target that could be easily overrun with superior numbers as he had previously hoped.

Following this loss, Xerxes divided his forces, leaving parts of his army in northern Greece under the leadership of Mardonius, still one of the highest commanders in the Persian military, while he led much of his army back across the pontoon bridges he had constructed across the Hellespont and into Asia Minor. The tactical considerations of this move are an interesting point in determining how the loss at Salamis and the high casualties at Thermopylae had changed the overall strategy of the Persian invasion. Originally, it is believed that Xerxes had planned to capture all of Greece or at least everything north of the Peloponnese in the campaigning season of 480 BCE. With the resistance so much greater than he had expected, however, it must have rapidly become clear to the Achaemenid emperor that the attempt to take Greece would be a multi-season campaign if it was to have any chance of success. Given the often unstable nature of the many states of the empire, it would not have done for Xerxes himself and so much of the military force of the empire to remain in Greece, especially if the Greek fleet, now free to move without as much hindrance from his own, sailed to the Hellespont and destroyed his fast path back into his own lands. While the strategic considerations made the withdrawal of Xerxes and a majority of his forces back into Asia the best possible move to ensure continued stability in the empire

he already ruled, it is almost certain that this decision set the stage for the eventual Persian defeat in Greece.

During the following campaigning season, in 479 BCE, Mardonius, probably in command of well less than a third of the army that had originally come across the Hellespont, would engage a Spartan-led land force at the Battle of Plataea, one of the most disastrous engagements in the history of the Achaemenid Empire. Once again, the Persians found themselves outmatched by the Greek hoplites' heavy armor, longer spears and the close-rank phalanx formation that was virtually impossible for the lighter Persian infantry to penetrate. This time, 10,000 hoplites of Sparta led the movement, along with a substantial force from Athens and contributing armies from the many states of the Peloponnesian League. When the Greeks advanced, they all but destroyed the Persian army, killing Mardonius in the process. Command of the army fell to a sub-commander named Artabazus, who led a retreat that managed to preserve the lives of many thousands of his men, though the hopes of the Persian force conquering Greece were now forever crushed.

On the same day as the loss at Plataea, a battle known as the Battle of Mycale resulted in the capture and complete destruction of everything that was left of the Achaemenid fleet. With only some 40,000 men left under Artabazus retreating through Macedonia and Thrace and the fleet utterly destroyed, the event that has come to be known as the Second Persian Invasion of Greece ended in one of the

rare complete defeats of the Persian military. Artabazus would later successfully reach Asia Minor and be rewarded for his efforts in returning what was left of the army with a *satrapy* in Phrygia. For the Achaemenid Empire, however, the loss was nothing short of disastrous. Massive amounts of men and resources had been poured into the failed invasion, and even the enormous wealth and power of the empire that stretched from eastern Europe to India was notably depleted by the effort. This overuse of the funds and resources of the empire would set the tone for much of the reign of Xerxes the Great, and would eventually contribute not only to his own downfall but also to the decline of the empire built by his predecessors in the Achaemenid line.

As far as modern historians are aware, the remaining years of the reign of Xerxes were a period of relative stability in the Achaemenid Empire in that there were no further major revolts or military campaigns launched during this time. In another sense, however, the later years of Xerxes' rule would be a disaster for the empire. Turning away from military matters, the emperor decided to pursue a series of massive and expensive construction projects throughout the empire that he had originally begun around 482 BCE, particularly in the unfinished capital of Persepolis and the ancient Elamite capital city of Susa. Many of the projects would be expansions or continuances of projects that had been started by Darius I, but Xerxes' massive projects and plans would call for extensive new taxation across the empire. Through this program, Xerxes finished the construction of a palace

complex Darius had begun in Susa as well as his own palace complex in Persepolis. Probably the most famous ruin from this period of construction in the Achaemenid capital is the Gate of All Nations (sometimes called the Gateway of All Lands), a large hall that would have accommodated visitors to the court of Xerxes. Construction projects were also undertaken in the Median capital of Ecbatana during this time frame.

Unfortunately, the scale of the projects and the taxes that had to be levied in order to pay for them began to take a heavy toll on the economy of the Achaemenid Empire. Taxes were also levied to construct roads between major cities within the heart of the empire, taking up even more resources. Xerxes, as far as is known, did not stop or postpone the projects, even as his empire strained under the weight of the expenses. Unrest in the empire would almost certainly have been the result of these policies, though it seems that the military might of Persia had grown to such a degree under Xerxes that no major rebellions occurred as a direct result of the punitive taxation.

During this same time period, beginning in about 477 BCE, Xerxes faced a new difficulty within his empire, and one that would plague his successor throughout his reign. The Greeks, far from being satisfied with having defeated the Persians in their territory, now allied and undertook a series of campaigns against portions of the Achaemenid Empire, known today as the Wars of the Delian League, named for the Athenian-led alliance that was formed to facilitate

them. These wars cost Xerxes the Thracian territories that his father had conquered and resulted in the destruction of a major Persian fleet at the Battle of the Eurymedon, which occurred in either 469 or 466 BCE (sources vary), very near the end of Xerxes' reign. Xerxes himself would die long before the end of these wars, which would prove costly to the empire in lands, wealth and resources.

If ancient sources are to be believed, massive construction expenses were just one of the two great indulgences of Xerxes the Great in the later years of his reign, the other being women. Herodotus records an incident in which Xerxes' affections extended to both his sister-in-law by his brother Masistes and her daughter, his own niece and his daughter-in-law by one of his sons. An affair with the daughter ensued, prompting Xerxes' wife Amestris to have the wife of Mesistes brutally mutilated by the personal bodyguard of the emperor. Masistes planned a revolt against his own brother as revenge for Xerxes' allowance of the attack on his wife, but was discovered and killed before his plans were fully formulated. By this point, the disquiet over the massively expensive building projects, the hatred of Xerxes in many of the lands that he ruled and the danger that his whims seemed to present to anyone in his court made him a massive liability to those around him and in 465 BCE, as was so common in the ancient world, this liability was done away with via the most expedient and certain possible method: assassination.

The man who would kill the world's most powerful king was none

other than the commander of his royal guard, Artabanus. Accounts differ with regards to the exact details, but Artabanus is known to have murdered Darius, the son of Xerxes who was next in line, before killing his father. Artabanus then became the primary ruler of the Achaemenid Empire, though only for a period of time that is estimated at between a few weeks and a few months. Another son of the deceased Xerxes, named Artaxerxes, decided to claim the throne and full control of the empire for himself. Artabanus was killed by Artaxerxes, who then became the emperor of the Achaemenid Empire built to its greatest heights by his father and grandfather.

The reigns of Darius the Great and Xerxes the Great had seen the Achaemenid Empire grow into a power that few could have ever imagined, particularly following the instability that had followed the death of Cambyses II and the subsequent ascension of Darius. However, the Achaemenid Empire was a force whose time in history was comparatively brief, and by the time that Xerxes the Great was assassinated by one of his own closest servants, the seeds of its decline had already been sown. The military fiasco that had constituted Xerxes' failed attempts to conquer Greece and the massive construction projects that followed and defined the later years of his rule had begun to drain the resources of the empire, and even the power of the Achaemenids could not sustain such policies indefinitely. Though the reign of Artaxerxes I would remain fairly stable, it would mark the beginning of the decline of the mightiest empire that the world had ever seen.

Section Four

Later Kings and Declining Years

When Artaxerxes I took power in 465 BCE, the Achaemenid Empire was still only recently coming off of the years that encompassed its greatest power and prosperity. However, the assassination of Xerxes and the events that followed had made for unstable political conditions that Artaxerxes would have to confront before his empire could be brought fully under his control. Almost as soon as the new king came to power, the eastern province of Bactria revolted. At that time, Bactria's *satrapy* was held by Hystaspes, the brother of Artaxerxes and another son of Xerxes, who also may have had a claim on the throne of the Achaemenid Empire. Ctesias, in his writings regarding the Persian empire, states that Artaxerxes I and Hystaspes fought in two battles against each other in the east. The first was apparently not decisive enough to have produced a clear winner or loser, but in the second, Artaxerxes soundly defeated his brother and secured Bactria once again.

By 460 BCE, Egypt was also once again in a full revolt against the Achaemenid Empire. A Libyan king named Inaros II had successfully stirred the country into a new rebellion and secured Athenian support for his efforts against Artaxerxes. In that year, the *satrap* of Egypt, Achaemenes (the brother of Xerxes) was killed in a battle with the rebels under Inaros, making it necessary for Artaxerxes to take action. Two of his most trusted *satraps*, Artabazus of Phrygia (the same who had led the Persian forces out of Greece after Plataea) and Megabyzus of Syria, were sent to put down the revolt. It took some time to coordinate and plan the effort to retake Egypt, but by 456 BCE the armies of both *satraps* appear to have been active in Egypt.

Between 460 and 455 BCE, the remaining Persian officials and military personnel in Egypt had been besieged at the capital city of Memphis by the forces of Inaros. In 455 BCE, the Achaemenid forces that had been sent under Artabazus and Megabyzus broke the siege and liberated the city, scoring an important victory against the Egyptian rebels. Inaros himself was forced to retreat to the city of Byblos, today in Lebanon but at that time part of the Egyptian sphere of influence, where he and his remaining forces were eventually taken by Megabyzus, who returned him to Susa as a prisoner of war.

After the Athenian intervention began in Egypt, Artaxerxes I devised a new plan to prevent his Greek enemies from meddling in the affairs of his empire. As all efforts to conquer Greece had failed and proven

to be devastating for the empire, Artaxerxes was either unwilling or unable to launch another invasion. Instead, he relied on a political solution that would prove to be at least somewhat effective. Sparta and the Peloponnesian League were, by this point in Greek history, heavily at odds with the Athenians. The result of this enmity was an event known as the First Peloponnesian War (not to be confused with the better-known war known simply as the Peloponnesian War, which occurred slightly later). In order to hinder Athens, the Achaemenid emperor decided to offer support to Sparta and its allies, establishing a diplomatic relationship with the powerful city-state of the extreme south of Greece that would continue intermittently for many years, often benefiting both parties.

By about 449 BCE, the wars with Athens, which was now in the midst of the First Peloponnesian War, had concluded. A peace treaty, known historically as the Peace of Callais, may have formalized this peace agreement, but it is not definitively known to have been written and adopted. Accounts of the supposed treaty suggest that it gave the states of Ionian Greece, which the Greeks and Persians had so long fought over, a state of autonomous rule free from the Achaemenid Empire. In addition, an agreement was likely struck that Persian forces would remain away from the Aegean and Greece itself in exchange for the promise of Athens and its allies not to interfere in the existing *satrapies* of the empire. In this form, the agreement would largely have stabilized the western borders of the Achaemenid Empire and put to rest the long-standing conflict between Greece and Persia that had

been ongoing since the time of Darius the Great and had proven horribly costly for both sides. Though Persia and Greece would continue to have frequent contact with each other and Persian military assistance would be given to various groups of Greek city-states from time to time, the Greco-Persian wars were now, at last, finished.

With one of his greatest military problems solved by making peace with Greece, it would seem that Artaxerxes would have been free to administer his empire without threat of war or rebellion. This, however, would not yet be the case, as one of his loyal *satraps* was soon to rebel. Megabyzus, one of the most powerful regional governors in the empire and a military hero in his own right for his defeat of the Egyptian rebels and their Athenian allies, staged an uprising against Artaxerxes. The reason for this, as reported by Ctesias, was that Megabyzus had guaranteed the safety of the Egyptian hostages who had surrendered, but that Artaxerxes had ordered them to be executed anyway. This, however, is likely an insufficient reason for such a revolution to have taken place, making it likely that it was either a response to the heavy taxation that Artaxerxes was still imposing over many of the lands under his dominion or that the rebellion was simply a move for personal power on the part of Megabyzus. Whatever the case may have been, the rebellion was short-lived. Megabyzus was soon allowed to return to the empire with no punishment or loss of rank, which he apparently did, resolving what could have potentially been a very severe threat to the

Achaemenid Empire from the *satrap* of a militarily powerful province who knew the tactics of Persian armies in the field well enough to fight against them very effectively.

Of the later years of the reign of Artaxerxes I, details are elusive. A series of cuneiform tablets found in the ancient Mesopotamian city of Nippur, known collectively as the Murasu Archive, appear to begin sometime during the mid to later reign of Artaxerxes and seem to show that, in Mesopotamia at least, the economic situation during this period was still relatively good, though it is likely that by this time the building and military projects that the Achaemenid Empire had levied taxes for had begun to take their toll in the wider economic context of the empire. It is also known from Greek accounts that Themistocles, the Athenian commander who had defeated the Persians at Salamis, was welcomed into the court of Artaxerxes I after having been exiled from Athens, an indication that the relations between Greece and Persia may have improved over the long reign that Artaxerxes enjoyed.

Historical elements of the Old Testament also make references to Artaxerxes I. While biblical history is often difficult to verify and in some cases is very questionable in its accuracy indeed, the fact that the Hebrew population that lived in roughly contemporary times with the original writings of these scriptures found itself under the rule of the Achaemenid Empire leads to the conclusion that these accounts are probably largely accurate. These texts seem to reflect a period

during which the Hebrew population within the empire was treated well by the king and lived in relative prosperity. Sometime in or around 445 BCE, Artaxerxes is recorded to have ordered a rebuilding of the walls of the city of Jerusalem, which Cyrus the Great had allowed the Hebrews to return to during his own reign (the city having previously been conquered by the Babylonians during the time of the Neo-Babylonian Empire).



Illustration 8: Etching depicting Artaxerxes I's proclamation for rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem.

After a long reign that resulted in a period of stability (especially when compared to the frequent rebellions and wars that had characterized the reigns of his two immediate predecessors), Artaxerxes I died in 424 BCE. His more than four decades on the

throne of the Achaemenid Empire will probably never be remembered as well as the reigns of Darius I, Xerxes I or Cyrus the Great, as he fought no massive wars and did not expand the empire as they had. In some ways, however, Artaxerxes I acted as a critical bridge in the history of the empire. His long and fairly peaceful reign solidified an empire that had been in an almost permanent phase of expansion since the war between Cyrus the Great and the Medes. By providing an extended period of stability in which the internal policies of the Achaemenid Empire were administered well and resources were not devoted to ceaseless wars, Artaxerxes had given his enormous empire a chance to recover from the rule of his father.

Upon the death of Artaxerxes, however, the empire would return, at least briefly, to its more normal state of internal strife. A new succession crisis of strange complexity began almost as soon as Artaxerxes had died, and would threaten to tear the vast Achaemenid Empire apart before it ended. Upon the death of the old king, an initially smooth transition to Xerxes II, believed to have been his only legitimate son, occurred. Xerxes II, however, would reign for less than two months before two of his illegitimate brothers each made an attempt on the throne. The first was Sogdianus, who had previously found support from the Elamite lands for his own claim to the throne. At the order of Sogdianus, Xerxes II was assassinated, leaving the illegitimate son as the heir to the throne. However, yet another illegitimate son was also prepared to make a play for the greatest position of power in the ancient world. This son was named Ochus,

and was a *satrap* of Hycarnia, in the north of modern-day Iran. Ochus led a revolution and killed Sogdianus, becoming the new Achaemenid emperor. Upon coming to power, he adopted the name of Darius II, doubtlessly to connect himself to the legacy of Darius the Great and to help legitimize his rule. Darius II is believed to have taken power in very early 423 BCE (possibly in the final days of 424 BCE).

The reign of Darius II is a period of Achaemenid history about which less is known than the rules of his illustrious predecessors. However, some key events are known from surviving accounts. In 420 BCE, Darius is known to have faced a rebellion in Lydia led by its *satrap* Pisuthnes. The rebellion was put down by a general named Tissaphernes, who took Pisuthnes' place as the new *satrap*. Another rebellion in Media in 409 BCE was just as unsuccessful and was put down in fairly short order.

By far the most important facet of the policies of Darius II that modern historians are aware of is his foreign policy with regards to the city-states of Greece. It had become clear under Artaxerxes I that using Sparta and Athens against each other was a policy that suited the interests of the Achaemenid Empire admirably. The rule of Darius II spanned much of the Peloponnesian War, an event in which he at first took no sides. However, as the war raged on, he eventually found himself in support of Sparta for two reasons. The first, and most important, was that Sparta had no designs on any of the lands in Ionia and around the Aegean that had so long been a source of dispute

between Athens and the Achaemenid Empire. The second was that his son Cyrus was close friends with the noted Spartan commander Lysander, who used his influence in the Persian court to secure funding and support for the Peloponnesian League during the war. Sparta would, of course, ultimately win the war, though the Achaemenid contribution would be fairly minimal.

In 404 BCE, after nearly two decades of rule, Darius II died, leaving his son Artaxerxes II as the heir to the throne. His younger son Cyrus, however, would attempt to seize power from Artaxerxes II shortly after he had become the new emperor. Leading a mercenary army that he had been able to amass against Artaxerxes II, Cyrus scored important victories and may indeed have succeeded in overthrowing his brother had he not been killed in battle in 401 BCE. With this single challenger for the throne removed, the grip of Artaxerxes on power became absolute.

During the same time period, Artaxerxes was caught up in another war in Egypt. Just after Darius II had died, an Egyptian rebel by the name of Amyrtaeus had managed to drive the Persians out of parts of Egypt and had assumed the title of pharaoh. The rebellion of Amyrtaeus was no new phenomenon, as he himself had been engaged in fighting the Persians throughout much of the last decade of Darius II's rule. However, with the old king dead, Amyrtaeus found the perfect opportunity to declare his independence as the new ruler of the Egyptian kingdom, though parts of it would remain under

Achaemenid control for several more years. By 398 BCE, however, Amyrtaeus had been defeated by yet another challenger to the throne, the pharaoh Nephertites, and the Achaemenid control of Egypt was temporarily broken.

In 396 BCE, Persia yet again found itself entangled in a war with the Greeks, but this time not with Athens. Sparta, having won the Peloponnesian War, was at the height of its power and had established a general military hegemony over Greece. With the city-state secure in its power in Greece, one of its two kings, Agesilaus II, launched an attack on Persia's holdings in the Ionian city-states. Agesilaus also conducted raids throughout Lydia and Phrygia, taking much of the wealth of the *satraps* of those regions. The situation would certainly have called for military action on the part of Artaxerxes II, especially as the Spartan army drove itself deeper into his territories. By a stroke of political machination, however, the need to do so was alleviated by the recall of Agesilaus to Sparta, which needed his forces and his leadership to deal with yet another war within Greece itself. This war, known as the Corinthian War, pitted Sparta against Athens, Thebes, Corinth, Argos and several smaller cities. In order to deal with the Spartan army that was in his lands, Artaxerxes II offered naval support and funding to the states that had allied against Sparta, forcing the Spartans to recall their king and his forces. Agesilaus left the Persian lands, though not without having done significant damage to both the regions he had invaded and to the generally peaceful relations that Persia had, in the years that immediately preceded his incursion,

pursued with Sparta.

These relations, however, would be mended as the Corinthian War came to a close. In either 386 or 387 BCE, the Corinthian war ended with a treaty known as the King's Peace. Interestingly enough, the peace was enforced by the threat of Persian military intervention in Greece, which was leveled against any party that came into violation of the terms of the peace agreement. Even the place where the peace was finally negotiated reflects the degree to which the Persian king held sway over the proceedings of the peace talks, as the treaty was drafted and negotiated in the Achaemenid stronghold of Susa, rather than in Greece. This agreement also nullified the military gains that Agesilaus II had made against the empire by returning Ionia to Persian control.

With Greece yet again settled, Artaxerxes II would turn his attention to Egypt, a loss too great for any ruler of the Achaemenid Empire to simply accept. Beginning in 385 BCE, the Achaemenid Empire launched a new war on Egypt, which was now under the rule of the pharaoh Hakor. This war failed, and Hakor was able to drive the invading Persians out of his territory once again. Multiple attempts would be made during the reign of Artaxerxes II to bring Egypt back into the empire, as its wealth and resources had played a key role in its structure. Another attempt to invade Egypt was made in either 374 or 374 BCE during the rule of the pharaoh Nectanebo I. During this invasion, Artaxerxes once again made use of the relations he had

cultivated with Greece by hiring Athenian mercenaries to join the invasion, which was led by the noted Persian commander Pharnabazus. This effort, however, was doomed to failure just as the previous ones had been. Internal strife between the Persian commander and the leader of his Greek mercenaries, combined with stiff resistance on the part of the Egyptian forces commanded by Nectanebo, led to the expedition ending in a Persian defeat.

By far the greatest threat faced by Artaxerxes II during his reign was an event that has come to be known as the *Satraps' Revolt*. As we have discussed the arc of Achaemenid history, it has likely been clear that *satraps* were a crucial part of the empire. Being as vast as it was, having a central authority making all of the decisions in the running of the Achaemenid Empire would have been neither practical nor possible. *Satraps*, therefore, were key figures of local authority that governed the day-to-day activities of their provinces and took direction from the Achaemenid emperors on matters that involved imperial policy. Given the reliance of the Achaemenids on their *satraps* to manage the far-ranging lands of the empire, a general uprising of the various *satraps* was perhaps the worst possible event imaginable. This is exactly what Artaxerxes II faced beginning in 372 BCE, when the first of his *satraps*, Datames of Cappadocia (one of the regions of central Anatolia), rebelled against Achaemenid rule.

After the revolt of Datames, Artaxerxes ordered other *satraps* in the vicinity of Cappadocia to attack it and to subdue the rebellion.

However, Datames, a seasoned military commander in his own right, was able to defeat his neighboring kings, leaving his power in Cappadocia intact. Within a few years, in 366 BCE, Datames was joined by Ariobarzanes, the *satrap* of Phrygia. The greatest blow came in 362, when Orontes, the *satrap* of Armenia, joined the other rebelling rulers. Orontes was not only a powerful *satrap*, but was of noble birth within Persian society, lending a high degree of political credibility to the revolts of the other *satraps*, who allied with him to legitimize their own resistance to the Achaemenid Empire. This revolution, however, began to fall apart shortly afterward, and the empire began to score victories over its rebelling regional governors. By about 360 BCE, the revolt is thought to have been either over or in its last days, with some of the rebellious *satraps* having died in battle and others being coerced back into imperial service with the promise of pardons and land grants.

In 358 BCE, Artaxerxes II died. His reign had seen the decline of the Achaemenid Empire begin to set in in earnest, though it would recover some of the losses under later rulers. The revolutions, the loss of Egypt and the frequent fighting between the empire and the Greek city-states, which previously had been nowhere near capable of matching the power of Persia outside of Greece, all demonstrate a gradual but very real decline in the power and influence of the empire. We must remember, however, that the Achaemenid Empire was starting from a very high base line, and even a period of decline such as that experienced under Artaxerxes II did not seriously affect

its status as the most powerful state in the ancient world.

Upon the death of Artaxerxes II, Artaxerxes III came to power. Several other sons of Artaxerxes II had already died before their father, but Artaxerxes III meant to be sure that no succession crisis of the type that usually followed the death of a king of Persia could occur. To this end, he ordered the death of many dozens of his immediate relatives so that no one with even the remotest claim on the throne could challenge him for power.

Artaxerxes III would set about a policy of correcting some of the follies of his father and other Achaemenid kings. In some ways, his rule would undo at least parts of the decline that the empire had experienced under Artaxerxes II. One of his early areas of focus was Asia Minor, which had so long been a thorn in the side of the empire, both through the interference of the Greeks and the rebellions of various *satraps* that held power there. During the years of his early reign, the Athenians were once again involving themselves in wars in the westernmost regions of the empire, even though the King's Peace established under his predecessor had forbidden such activities. Artaxerxes III, however, managed to conclude a peace with Athens that resulted in the withdrawal of Athenian forces from his territories after having defeated the Athenians in the field.

Throughout his reign, Artaxerxes III would continue his father's policy of attempting to regain Egypt, the departure of which having

been one of the largest blows that the empire had ever suffered. His first invasion of Egypt would take place in 351 BCE, when a large army was sent to subdue the Egyptians, now ruled by Nectanebo II. Though this force was able to deal a large amount of damage to the armies of Egypt, it was not sufficient to retake the kingdom, leaving Egypt weakened but still independent. The invasion force, however, was eventually compelled to retreat into friendly territory until another army could be sent to finish the task of retaking Egypt.

Artaxerxes III was then plagued with a series of rebellions that threatened to take much of what is today Turkey out of his hands. Nectanebo II, eager to divert the attentions of the Persian king away from Egypt, lent troops and support to the revolutions, and it must have become quite clear that Artaxerxes would have to attack to put down these rebellions. To this end, he assembled one of the largest armies that the Achaemenid Empire had fielded since Xerxes' invasion of Greece, which he led into the western extremes of his empire personally. This force was used primarily to attack the ancient city of Sidon, today located in Lebanon, which was one of the major centers of the revolution. The city was almost completely destroyed, prompting many of the other rebelling areas to surrender themselves back into the authority of the Achaemenid Empire. Much like Xerxes the Great before him, Artaxerxes III had proven that disobeying him could come at an incredibly high price for those who dared to do it.

Once these rebellions were ended, the emperor once again looked to

Egypt, which he still had not abandoned hope of reincorporating into his empire. The army which he had assembled to attack his enemies in Sidon was sufficiently large to allow him to use it for an Egyptian invasion, especially since he had hired groups of Greek mercenaries to augment his fighting force. Marching into Egypt, Artaxerxes III possessed a force that probably outnumbered the total armies of Egypt by a factor of at least three to one. Already weakened from the earlier invasion, Nectanebo II had little chance of success. The pharaoh staged a defense at Memphis before eventually retreating to the south and entering the Nubian lands, which Artaxerxes had shown no interest in conquering. This second conquest of Egypt is believed to have been completed with the retaking of the city of Memphis by the army of Artaxerxes in about 342 BCE.

Much as he had punished the lands in Asia Minor that had revolted against his rule, Artaxerxes decided to levy heavy fines in the form of massive taxation against Egypt, as well as taking much of its existing wealth back to Persia with him as spoils of war. His plan was to so thoroughly destroy the economy of Egypt that, even in the event that another rebellion could arise, it would be impossible for new rebels to find enough funding to offer serious opposition to the Achaemenid Empire. This program bred excessive resentment toward Persia in Egypt, but would ultimately keep it under the rule of Persepolis until the end of Achaemenid history, which was now not long in coming.

Artaxerxes III, however, would not live long to enjoy the fruits of his

military successes. In 338, he died after ruling the Achaemenid Empire for 20 years. Over the course of his reign, he had reestablished Persia as a great military power and had taken back the Egyptian kingdom that had briefly won its independence. He had also added his own building projects to those of his predecessors. Most notable is the palace complex that he constructed for himself at the city of Persepolis, though other buildings and architectural features in the city have been dated to his reign as well.

Following the death of Artaxerxes III, his son Artaxerxes IV would come to power as the penultimate ruler of the Achaemenid Empire. However, it is likely that he had little power in his own right, instead being governed by Bagoas, a palace eunuch who had risen to become one of the primary advisers of Artaxerxes III and had amassed a massive fortune by selling religious texts that had been stolen during the recent invasion of Egypt back to the priests of Egypt for large sums of money, knowing that the sacred texts were invaluable to the priests and that they would pay any sum they could collect to regain them. Some have even suggested that Bagoas murdered Artaxerxes III to clear the way for the weaker and easier to manipulate Artaxerxes IV to come to power. This assertion, however, has been shown to be very unlikely by contemporary cuneiform texts that indicate that Artaxerxes III was not murdered.

The death of Artaxerxes III served as the signal for the many lands of the empire that were dissatisfied with its rule to rebel once more,

knowing that the new king was almost certainly unable to match his father's military skills. Egypt and possibly Babylon rose up in new revolts, and were soon joined by *satraps* across the empire, replicating in many ways the calamity that had faced the Achaemenids during the *Satraps'* Revolt. At the same time, a new power was rising in the west that would soon take the Achaemenid Empire by storm. Macedon, which at intervals had been a province of the Persian empire, was entering into its own expansionist phase under a king named Philip II. Soon, Artaxerxes IV found himself with an invading army entering Asia Minor to seize the holdings of his empire there.

Artaxerxes IV would rule for only two years. Surviving accounts suggest that he may have been murdered by Bagoas, who feared that the king might have been planning his assassination. However, as Bagoas was also accused of the murder of Artaxerxes III, almost certainly incorrectly, it may well be that he was also innocent of the death of Artaxerxes IV. With the emperor's death in 336 BCE, the final ruler of the Achaemenid Empire came to power. This ruler, Darius III, was installed in office by Bagoas, but soon killed the vizier, allegedly by making him drink poison that he (Bagoas) had intended for Darius.

The rule of Darius III would bring an inglorious and unfitting end to one of the single greatest empires in the history of the world. When he inherited the throne, the armies of Philip of Macedon were still waging war in the western frontiers of the empire, while several of his *satraps* were still either in a state of active rebellion or had become so

disconnected from the Achaemenid Empire that they essentially ruled their lands as autonomous kingdoms. Darius would get a brief respite when, in 336 BCE, Philip was assassinated by one of his own bodyguards, leaving his son Alexander, better known in the popular mind as Alexander the Great, as the new king of Macedon.

Alexander would take nearly two years to reignite the campaigns his father had begun against the Persians. In 334 BCE, however, Alexander marched his armies into Asia with the intent of taking the lands of the Achaemenid Empire, now weak and torn nearly apart by its own internal strife, into his own dominion. The first great battle in the war between these two states would occur at the Granicus River, today in Turkey. Though a Persian force was dispatched to face Alexander, Darius III did not take the Macedonian army as the serious threat that it was, imagining neither that Alexander would prove to be one of the greatest generals in all of history nor that he had designs on the entire Achaemenid Empire, rather than just the lands near to Greece. Because of this, the Persians fielded a much smaller army than Alexander and found themselves badly outmatched by his deployments of his troops. The Battle of the Granicus River handed over much of Asia Minor to Alexander, and set the stage for the war between he and the Persians that was to come.



Illustration 9: A detail from a famous mosaic showing Darius III in battle against Alexander.

Matters would only become worse when Darius decided that he would enter the conflict at the head of his own armies. A poor commander at best, Darius III would lead his armies into defeat at the hands of the Macedonian king. The first instance in which this occurred was the Battle of Issus, in 333 BCE. This time, Darius had the numerical advantage, commanding some 100,000 men against the 40,000 led by Alexander. However, through an excellent usage of a combination of infantry and cavalry, Alexander managed to penetrate the Persian line while his own left flank came under heavy attack from the Persian cavalry, giving him enough time to turn his enemy's lines and send the Persians into an unorganized retreat. Perhaps worst for the morale and organization of the Achaemenid army was the fact that Darius, upon realizing that his lines had been broken, fled from the battlefield in an act of cowardice that would have humiliated any king of the ancient world.

Issus was a turning point of monumental proportions in Achaemenid history. Not only had Alexander beaten the numerically superior Persian army with its king in command in the field, but he had also managed to show Darius as a coward in front of his men. However, the war was not yet over, and Alexander was not yet the conqueror of Persia. He would not truly defeat Darius until 331, when one of history's most famous battles and probably the greatest ever fought by Alexander made the Macedonian the master of the known world. That battle, which is known as the Battle of Gaugamela, would occur in the far north of what is today Iraq and would be the defining moment in the fall of the powerful Achaemenid Empire.

After Issus, Darius had made the decision to withdraw to Babylon and to make it the headquarters from which he would conduct the war. This tactic was not altogether an unreasonable one, as Alexander would have had to fight his way east and into Mesopotamia, presumably losing troops and stretching his supply lines as he went. Against a less capable commander, it is very likely that Darius' usage of the vast distances that Alexander had to fight his way across to tire his Macedonian opponent out would have been a very effective tactic. At the same time, Darius attempted to dissuade Alexander from continuing his attack by offering him richer and richer deals, at one point even going so far as to offer half of the Achaemenid Empire to Alexander when it had become clear that the Persian forces in the various *satrapies* could not best his army in combat. Alexander,

however, seems to have had no interest in these offers, perhaps realizing that the empire could not defeat him.

By the time that the forces met again at Gaugamela in 331 BCE, Alexander had already taken much of the western Achaemenid Empire by force. Asia Minor, Syria and Egypt had already fallen to the conqueror, who now advanced toward Mesopotamia to take the lands that had made up the cradle of civilization. Once again, Darius outnumbered the forces of Alexander, fielding about 100,000 men (ancient sources, as is common, estimate a force many times larger, but one that seems unrealistically large for the time period) against a force of about 47,000 men. Sheer numbers, however, would do him no greater favors here than they had at Issus.

The Battle of Gaugamela was Darius' last chance to defeat Alexander, and for it he had carefully prepared an army pulled from across his empire. His large infantry would be backed by extensive cavalry which could be used to outmaneuver and harass the enemy lines, as well as scythed chariots, a peculiar invention of the Persians that added rotating blades to the wheels of a standard chariot. When driven through enemy infantry, these blades could be devastatingly effective, cutting down men on 2-3 feet of either side of the chariot. War elephants were also brought from the far east, along with archers and infantrymen from the many lands of the empire. Finally, the royal guard of Darius, probably the same unit that came to be called the Immortals in the accounts of the Persian invasion of Greece under

Xerxes, held the center of the Persian line. Darius' deployments were made before Alexander arrived at the battlefield, allowing him the leisure to place his troops and his lines as he pleased. The Persians were deployed into a long line with cavalry on the flanks, so as to make it easy to turn the lines of Alexander's much smaller force. Initially, it would seem, the last Achaemenid emperor had every possible strategic advantage.

Alexander approached the battlefield with a strong center formation which consisted of two phalanxes, one in the front for the primary fighting and another behind it for auxiliary support and to ward off attempts to flank the primary line. Darius, using the narrower disposition of his enemy, sent cavalry forces to turn Alexander's left flank while engaging with the front line phalanx in the center. Alexander himself, however, commanded the Macedonian right flank, and made an incredibly risky move by leading his own cavalry to his extreme right, forcing the cavalry forces on the Persian left to engage him. This move was a risk in that it spread his line thinly across the battlefield where he was already outnumbered and risked the destruction of a large part of his cavalry, which was crucially important, at the hands of the much larger Persian force. Though risky, the tactic was a stroke of calculated military genius. By forcing the Persian cavalry to engage him on his extreme right while the other flank was also battling the Persian cavalry at the other end of the field, Alexander forced Darius to spread his forces out and to leave his center with only minimal cavalry support, leaving the center of the

Persian line open to attack.

Realizing that he needed to swiftly deal with the attack on his left flank (Alexander's right), Darius committed the scythed chariots to attack. Alexander, however, seems to have been keenly aware of the destructive power of these war machines and to have trained his troops to successfully deal with them. Rather than attempting to hold back the chariots, an effort that surely would have been too costly in terms of human life, the ranks of the Macedonian troops parted to simply allow the chariots to pass through them, dealing comparatively minimal damage. This shows us, to some extent, the degree to which Alexander planned his battles, as he had thought up new tactics for possible contingencies based solely on the knowledge that Darius might employ scythed chariots at some point during the battle. This ability to think ahead and to carefully consider all possible outcomes in a battle is part of what so distinguishes Alexander in military history.

Next came the move that would define the entire Battle of Gaugamela. Alexander's rear phalanx began to move up, forming into a wedge formation that would be used to strike at the weakened Persian center from the right. This formation was joined by the cavalry that Alexander had been leading on his own extreme right and smashed into the Persian lines, effectively breaking them at what had, when the battle began, been their strongest point. The cavalry on Persian right, still engaged with Alexander's left flank, could do little

to help, and after a period of extremely heavy fighting, the Persian center caved. Darius III, seeing that he was once again defeated, fled the battlefield for a second time. Instead of pursuing, however, Alexander chose to remain at Gaugamela and to relieve his own left flank, which had been holding out against the greatly superior Persian cavalry from Darius' right flank since the battle had begun. Gaugamela turned into a complete victory for Alexander, though he had failed to capture his enemy. With the battle won, control of Mesopotamia fell by default into the hands of Alexander, and Achaemenid power was forever broken. It was now only a matter of time until Alexander became the king of an empire greater even than that which Cyrus the Great and Darius the Great had built from the many lands of Asia.

Darius III fled to Ecbatana, the capital of the Medes where, in a sense, the history of the Achaemenid Empire had begun in the earliest days of Cyrus the Great. From here, he and the forces still under his command fell back toward the east, moving toward Bactria, where Darius presumably planned to take another stand against Alexander. However, the effort was in vain. Darius was betrayed and imprisoned by a group of his commanders who felt that he could no longer effectively lead the army, especially given his two previous defeats at the hands of Alexander. By some accounts, he was wounded and later died when the Persians found out that the pursuing Macedonian army was close by. His body was later brought before Alexander, who is said to have returned it to Persepolis for a proper royal burial, an act of respect for the last emperor of the Achaemenid Empire and a

demonstration of Alexander's policy of generous treatment toward the peoples and lands that he conquered. By 328 BCE, the last of the *satraps* of the eastern provinces were defeated, bringing the whole of the Achaemenid Empire under Alexander, even as he pressed east into the Indian regions beyond the farthest eastern borders of the great empire of Asia.

With the actions of a single person leading a single army, the most powerful empire that the world had seen up to this time was ended. The Achaemenid Empire, however, had long since slipped past its prime. The economic toll from long-term high taxation had not only undermined many of the nations that made up the empire, but also made them ripe for rebellion. Alexander, with comparatively moderate policies toward conquered kingdoms, was welcomed as a greatly superior alternative, rather than despised as just another conqueror. As so often happens in great empires established by great men, a decline in the rulers themselves was also to blame for the gradual decline of the Achaemenid Empire. Xerxes the Great had fundamentally altered the policies of the empire, imposing high taxes, pursuing aggressive policies against lands that were already under his rule and allowing the kingship to evolve into a decadent institution. Certainly, other rulers allowed this trend to continue, and some, such as Artaxerxes III, would manage to undo some of the damage. By its end, however, the Achaemenid line of kings was no longer in the tradition of the great rulers that had defined its earliest days and built the empire into what it was.

Section Five

The Achaemenid Military: The Force That Conquered the Known World

Throughout the preceding overview of Achaemenid history, it has almost certainly become clear to the reader that the martial traditions and policies of Persia played a key role in creating, expanding and maintaining the empire. The Persian military under the Achaemenid line of kings was an interesting hybrid, particularly after it began to incorporate fighters from the lands that had been conquered. In many ways, this military was not quite like any other that the world had yet seen. For this reason, it is fitting that we herein dedicate ourselves to at least a brief study of the nature of this remarkable army.

From the earliest days of the Achaemenid Empire and even during the time that preceded it, the Persian military model was one of light infantry coupled with cavalry, the latter element playing a larger role than it did in many of the other land armies of the world. This focus on cavalry gave the Persians the advantage of speed and mobility on the battlefield. Chariots were also frequently made use of, especially during large pitched battles where they were most effective. Over the

course of Achaemenid history, this cavalry would consistently evolve based on the lands that were in the empire at the time. For example, elephant cavalry, a uniquely Indian custom that would survive well into the reign of the Mughal emperors of the 16th through 18th centuries of the Common Era, was adopted into the Persian military after Darius the Great's conquest of parts of India, though it was rarely used effectively in battle. Camels also found their place in the Persian cavalry, and frequently did see real battlefield use. Cavalry units were usually armed with a variety of weapons, including swords, spears and bows. Archers on horseback could prove particularly useful in battles, as they were able to combine a long effective range with the mobility of being on horseback, similar to the tactics commonly used by the Mongols under Genghis Khan many centuries later. Most accounts suggest that a type of scale armor was generally used by the horses assigned to Persian cavalry units, reducing the risk of damage to the animals during battle, especially from enemy archers.

Though they have gained an immense reputation from having been featured in the accounts of Thermopylae in the *Histories* of Herodotus, the Immortals, or personal guard of the Achaemenid Emperor, made up only one small part of the Persian infantry forces. This guard would have been made up of elite soldiers, likely pulled from the ranks of the Persian army and also from the lower-level nobility of the empire. True to the usual model of the Persian military, they were more lightly armed and armored than the hoplites of Greece, for example, but were a unit of more heavily-equipped soldiers than their

regular infantry counterparts. Woven wicker shields and scale armor provided light but effective protection for these soldiers, and were armed with short spears, swords and bows, making them highly versatile in a battle.

Making up the bulk of the regular Persian infantry were soldiers known as the *Sparabara*, who fought in a formation somewhat analogous to the Greek phalanx by forming a wall of shields from behind which spears could be used to strike at the enemy (though their spears were not as long nor their armor as heavy as that of a Greek phalanx). These soldiers, though light infantry, would have played a key role in advancing against enemies under cavalry and archer support, providing the main force that was used to defeat an opponent in a battle. They were also accompanied by an even lighter variety of infantryman, sometime referred to as a *Takabara*. These soldiers would have been used more for defensive purposes in the provinces than in major battles, though they did sometimes find themselves employed as light infantry in decisive conflicts. Beyond these specialized types of units were soldiers representing the martial traditions of the many kingdoms that made up the empire. These units were usually grouped together according to their own nationalities so that similar battle tactics could be employed within the units. However, in some cases, national military units were broken up so as to prevent the possibility for cohesive dissent. A prominent example is the massive army assembled by Xerxes for the Persian invasion of Greece.

Hailing originally from the plains of Central Asia before settling in Iran, the Persians had great traditions of infantry and particularly cavalry warfare, but were themselves not a seafaring people. In order to remain militarily competitive with the Mediterranean states, however, the Achaemenid Empire was forced to form a naval power. Generally speaking, the navy of the empire was left in the control of the peoples who did have a significant tradition of naval travel and combat, particularly the Phoenicians, one of the ancient world's greatest seafaring populations. As it grew, the Persian navy came to incorporate ships constructed to accomplish specific tasks, such as patrolling rivers and engaging in open-water combat, as in the case of the many battles fought in the Aegean. Ships were also frequently used to transport land troops directly to where they were needed. It is generally believed that the creation of an organized navy in the Achaemenid Empire began during the rule of Darius I, and by the time of Xerxes and his successors this navy represented a well-trained and effective sea force.

Behind the many units and branches of the military in the empire were royal engineers who helped to facilitate the movement of troops and the building of defensive works. Nowhere do we see better illustrated the ingenuity and efficacy of this group of engineers than in Xerxes' invasion of mainland Greece. Building the pontoon bridge over the Hellespont and cutting the canal across the isthmus of Mt. Athos were both massive undertakings for their time, requiring both huge

amounts of raw labor and a high degree of skill and knowledge to successfully execute. It is in this aspect of the military life of the Achaemenid Empire that we see an important fact about this empire in general reflected. Though it was a gigantic military and political force in the world in its time, it also drew heavily on the knowledge of the ancient world, cultivating a rich intellectual tradition that combined elements from all of the many cultures that were brought together under its banner.

Section Six

Art, Culture and Religion in the Achaemenid Empire

Though it retained much that was distinctly Persian at its core, the culture of the Achaemenid Empire evolved as it brought new lands into itself. This combined Achaemenid culture eventually came to incorporate elements from such diverse cultures as those of Egypt, Mesopotamia and India. Persia's role as the center of a multinational and multicultural empire had a profound impact on its own national and imperial character over the time that spans the history of the Achaemenid Empire.

The influence of many cultures in the Achaemenid Empire is probably best seen in its art and architecture, as these are among the more lasting and solid evidences for cultural incorporation of ideas from other civilizations. We have already briefly touched on this in an architectural sense during our discussion of the palaces, halls and décor that are prominently featured in the city of Persepolis. The phenomenon, however, reaches far beyond this one massive example. Much smaller pieces of art, such as gold and silver utensils and pieces of fine jewelry, also reflect upon both the wealth and many cultural influences that were at work in Persia during the period of the Achaemenid Empire. Artistically, it is fair to say that Mesopotamian influences seem to have played the largest role in shaping Persian culture during this time. This is likely because of long exposure, as the Elamite civilization that bordered Persia in what is today Iran was also heavily linked to the great cultures of Mesopotamia, and the influence of Assyrian art and culture during the time of the Neo-Assyrian Empire would have been inescapable. Many pieces, however, still reflect inclusions from cultures that the Persians made contact with much later, such as Egypt and India.



Illustration 10: A relief from the palace of Darius the Great in Susa. Influence from Egyptian and Mesopotamian cultures can be clearly seen in the artistic style of this piece.

Like many cultures in the area they occupied at the time, the Persians were also borrowers of the ancient cuneiform writing system, originally devised by the Sumerians in the mid 4th millennium BCE. This system of writing had become the standard of written

communication in the areas surrounding Mesopotamia when two Akkadian-speaking civilizations, those of Babylonia and Assyria, had adopted it as their writing system. Elamite, also, had been written in a type of cuneiform, giving the Persians multiple exposures to it. Though their language was not related to either the original Sumerian language nor any dialect of Akkadian, the writing system was versatile enough that it could be successfully adapted to convey Old Persian. This was also a useful tool for the Persians in conducting diplomatic relationships with the lands that they ruled, as the cuneiform script had been commonly known throughout even the lands of the Near East that did not use it since Akkadian had come to prominence as a diplomatic *lingua franca* during the period before the Late Bronze Age Collapse.

It would be untrue to the nature of the Achaemenid Empire as a multicultural state to say that any one religion was its sole faith. Religions ranging from ancient Egyptian and Mesopotamian religious systems to the Greek religion of the Ionian city-states and even Judaism were accepted within the empire, largely varying with region (though there was enough population movement within the empire that religions could spread with their followers). The one religion that is most commonly associated with Persia, the Achaemenid Empire and its rulers, however, is Zoroastrianism.

Precisely when Zoroastrianism originated is a matter of some debate among scholars of religious history. It is almost certain that the origins

of what would be recognizable as the Zoroastrian faith today lie in Iran, the country that would come to be its seat for most of its history until Zoroastrianism was suppressed following the Islamic revolution in 1979, when the temples of Zoroastrianism in Iran were largely destroyed. However, the religion's roots run into much earlier traditions that probably date back nearly 2,000 years earlier and are related to the early forerunners of Hinduism. Zoroaster, the priest and prophet whose name has become attached to the religion, was probably a figure of the 6th century BCE, a rough contemporary with either the earliest Achaemenid emperors or their pre-imperial predecessors. By the reign of Darius I, however, we may be fairly sure that the Achaemenid emperors had adopted Zoroastrianism, as the Behistun inscription makes repeated references of praise on Darius' behalf to Ahura Mazda, the primary deity of this ancient religion.

Like any major religion, Zoroastrianism is a complex system of theology to which entire works can be and have been devoted. However, for our purposes in exploring the cultural nature of the Achaemenid Empire, it seems fitting here that we engage in at least a brief discussion of the major features of this religion. Zoroastrian belief, which evolved out of the polytheistic traditions native to Iran and Central Asia in the pre-Achaemenid period, embraces two primary forces in the universe, which are personified as two separate beings. The first, Ahura Mazda, is considered to be the representation of all good, as well as the transcendent creator god of the religion. Being that both religions are known to share common roots, some scholars

have suggested that Ahura Mazda and Brahma, the Hindu creator god with some similar characteristics to his Zoroastrian counterpart, may in fact be different representations of a single god that was at one time worshiped in Central Asia and spread to both Iran and India in remote antiquity. This theory, however, has yet to be proven, though it remains an incredibly interesting possibility that shows fascinating possible parallels of cultural development between the two national groups.

Representing the opposite of order and goodness in the universe, Zoroastrians believe in another being personifying chaos, evil and ignorance, called Angra Mainyu. This dualistic perception of the nature of the universe is the main tenet of Zoroastrian belief. Beneath these two ultimate beings are several more minor classes of gods and spirits, derived from the polytheistic pantheon in which Zoroastrianism finds its roots. Zoroastrian religious belief is somewhat unusual in that it suggests that human beings, far from being passive in the struggle between the two forces they believe govern the universe, actively participate in it by either embodying the principles of Ahura Mazda through good actions or the principles of Angra Mainyu through evil actions. Zoroastrians, however, do believe that the eventual victory of Ahura Mazda is an inevitable outcome of reality and that time will end when this occurs.

Though the Persian empire that produced and embraced it is long gone, Zoroastrianism remains today as a living religion, albeit one that

has diminished significantly in modern times. Since the Iranian revolution, many Iranian Zoroastrians have relocated to India, where there was already a fairly large population of practicing Zoroastrians. The survival of this religion into the modern era is an interesting reminder that, very often, ideas and cultural features long survive the civilizations that produce them.

Section Seven

Achaemenid Influence on Later Iranian Empires

In the popular mind, the Achaemenid Empire is usually considered to be synonymous with the Persian empire, which more accurately is an umbrella term used to refer to a series of different empires that were based in Iran in antiquity. While none of these empires would reach quite the same size or power that was enjoyed by the Achaemenid Empire, all of them would emerge as major world powers and would owe much to their Achaemenid forerunner.

The first of this series of empires to follow the Achaemenid dynasty was the Seleucid Empire. This empire emerged only a few years after

the fall of the Achaemenid Empire, following the death of Alexander the Great and the subsequent breakup of the massive but short-lived empire that he had built. This empire, lasting from 312 BCE until 63 BCE, was greatly influenced by the traditions of the first Persian empire, though it also incorporated much of Greek culture into itself due to the brief rule of Alexander. The Seleucid Empire found itself as a major competitor state to early Rome, and eventually was largely brought into the Roman empire during the first century BCE. Though elements of this empire would continue to exist into the first century CE, it was at its height during its earlier years, and was soon to lose much of its territory and power to the next of the major Iranian empires.

This next empire, known as the Parthian Empire, started from within the Seleucid Empire itself. During the middle years of the second century BCE, the province of Parthia, which had already rebelled against the Seleucid Empire, expanded itself into a major state by seizing the Median lands and most of Mesopotamia. This Parthian Empire endeavored to connect itself to the legacy of the Achaemenid Empire, which by this time was widely seen as a long-gone golden age of Iranian power and influence. Though the Parthian Empire was significantly smaller than that of the Achaemenid dynasty, it made up for this with trade influence, largely controlling the movement of goods between India and China in the far east to the western lands, which by now were mostly under Roman influence. The Parthian Empire would also be fairly long lived, outlasting its competitive

Seleucid state by over 200 years. This empire's end would be defined by a clear break between it and the last of the great pre-Islamic empires in Iran: the Sassanid Empire.

The end of the Parthian Empire and the beginning of the Sassanid Empire came in 224 CE, when Artabanus V, the last of the Parthian emperors, was defeated in battle by Ardashir I, the founder and first ruler of the Sassanid Empire. This empire would become large and powerful, by far being the most influential since the fall of the Achaemenid Empire. Though some ancient Persian influences would find their way into the Sassanid dynasties, the cultures that themselves influenced Achaemenid Persia were now so long gone that cultural link was fairly diluted, especially in the light of more contemporary influences from India, China and the Eastern Roman, or Byzantine, Empire. It is with the Sassanids that we see the Achaemenid Empire, so long the envy of all other political entities in Iran, begin to recede into distant history, taking its place more as a memory than as a living influence on the newer empires. Still, Achaemenid ideas and culture did find their place in the Sassanid Empire, and through it some even found their way into Iranian culture after the Muslim invasions of the seventh century CE, which brought about the end of the Sassanid Empire and started an entirely new chapter in the history of Iran, just as the migration of the Persians and other Central Asian groups had more than 1,500 years prior.

With the Muslim invasion, the overall influence of the Achaemenid

Empire diminished greatly. Some figures, however, would still find roles in the new hybrid culture that arose out of a blending of the faith of Islam and the multicultural Sassanid Empire. Cyrus the Great, in particular, remained as a revered figure, so much so that even modern Iranian rulers have looked to him as one of the great figures of Iranian history. Indeed, the last Shah of Iran before the revolution of 1979, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, hosted a massive celebration in Cyrus' honor to celebrate the 2,500th anniversary of the founding of the Achaemenid Empire. The event strongly emphasized Iran's ancient past and included celebrations at Persepolis (a forgivable historical inaccuracy, given that the city was not founded until after the rule of Cyrus the Great). Such is the influence that some of the great kings of the Achaemenid Empire had on the course of world history that more than 2,000 years after the end of the empire, its influence is still somewhat felt in the culture of modern countries and many of its rulers, such as Cyrus, Darius the Great and Xerxes, have become at least passingly known even among the general public.

Appendixes

Appendix A

Major Lands of the Achaemenid Empire

As we have discussed thus far, the Achaemenid Empire was a truly multicultural state, drawing influence from kingdoms ranging from India to Greece. The history of this empire was also a part of the histories of each of these territories. Below will be brief overviews of some of the most major areas conquered by the Achaemenid Empire. Owing to the sheer number of individual kingdoms that found themselves as part of the first great Persian empire, however, this list is not comprehensive.

Elam- Also centered in what is today Iran, Elam was a civilization with roots that vastly predated the migration of the Persians and which stretched back to the very dawn of history. Capitalized at Susa, the Elamite civilization had been a major force in the region since the time of the ancient Sumerian civilization, the Mesopotamian predecessor to both Babylonia and Assyria. Elam was conquered early on in the Achaemenid Empire's history, and remained a key territory throughout much of its reign. Elam, however, had already seen its peak come and go, though it was still a great regional power by the time of Cyrus the Great. Unfortunately, Elamite civilization gradually seems to have faded into the background of the culture of Achaemenid Persia during this time. However, its language, art and customs played key roles in shaping the hybrid culture of Persia, and its capital at Susa was one of the most major cities in the empire throughout its

entire history.

Babylonia- The great state centered in the ancient city of Babylon, from which its name is derived, Babylonia had been a great power in Mesopotamia for many centuries prior to the coming of the Persians. Following the fall of the Neo-Assyrian Empire, a Neo-Babylonian Empire emerged that, when conquered, granted the Persians rule over most of Mesopotamia and many of the surrounding lands. Historically, the land of Babylonia itself is centered in the southern regions of Mesopotamia, though empires centered there had expanded far beyond this power center.

Assyria- Making up the region north of the Babylonian lands was Assyria, another among the very first civilizations in the world. Like the Babylonians, the Assyrians were a group of Semitic peoples, speaking a dialect of the Akkadian language different from that of the Babylonians. The Assyrian civilization appears to have emerged around the 26th and 25th centuries BCE, drawing heavily on Sumerian influence. Its major influence on the Achaemenid Empire is, however, much more contemporary, as the Neo-Assyrian Empire held power over Iran until its downfall during the late years of the seventh century BCE. This Assyrian influence is directly responsible for many of the Mesopotamian elements that are plainly visible in Achaemenid art and architecture. It is also probably how the Persians were exposed to the cuneiform writing system, which they eventually adopted for the written form of Old Persian.

Egypt- By far the best-known of the ancient civilizations of the world, Egypt entered the Achaemenid empire many centuries after golden ages of the Old, Middle and New Kingdoms. Though it was past its prime, the ancient kingdom still had much to offer the empire. The wealth of Egypt, in particular, made it a prime candidate for incorporation into the empire. It also offered its rich artistic influences to the Persians, who made Egyptian themes a part of their hybridized culture. The armies of Achaemenid Persia fought long and hard to conquer and hold onto Egypt, which was extremely prone to revolution and was one of the very few kingdoms to have successfully broken off from the Achaemenid Empire, albeit only briefly, during the time when its power was still near its height.

Bactria- One of the most important provinces of the east, Bactria is located in what is today Afghanistan and parts of Tajikistan. Bactrian civilization goes back into the second and late third millennium BCE with a Bronze Age culture known today as the Oxus Civilization. Bactria has been theorized as one of the possible sources of population migration into India that has been proposed as one of the major reasons for the collapse of the Indus Valley Civilization. Bactria was also of historical importance in the context of the religious nature of Achaemenid Persia, as it is likely the birthplace of the priest and prophet Zoroaster. Bactria had come under Median influence during the years that preceded the creation of the Achaemenid Empire and was incorporated into it after the fall of Media. Throughout the

history of the empire, Bactria was one of the most important of the *satrapies*, as it was often put under the rule of intended heirs to the throne (though it was frequent for intended heirs to find themselves denied the throne, as we have already seen). Bactria was also one of the last Achaemenid refuges during the conquests of Alexander.

Armenia- Often forgotten due to its current state as a rather minor country, Armenia was once a great kingdom that exerted much influence in Central Asia. As part of the ancient kingdom of Urartu, it was a major power prior to the Achaemenid Empire, which incorporated it during the reign of Cyrus the Great.

Scythia- Stretching from the plains of Asia into eastern Europe, the region of Scythia contained many smaller provinces and was the home of the semi-nomadic Scythian tribes. Much of this region did become part of the Achaemenid Empire, but the Persians were never able to completely co-opt the Scythians, who were willing to cede territory because they had no major permanent settlements. The land, being so underdeveloped, had little economic benefit to offer the empire, leaving it as a fairly unimportant part of the northern Achaemenid territories.

Lydia- Located in eastern Anatolia, the kingdom of Lydia in some ways served as the gateway between the Persian empire and the city-states of ancient Greece. The kingdom's history goes back to a Neo-

Hittite state that developed in the region formerly controlled by the Arzawa League, a loose alliance of ancient eastern Anatolian states that had banded together against the Hittite empire many centuries earlier. Lydia made a major contribution to the Achaemenid Empire and indeed to world economics in general by inventing the first known coins.

India- Although the Achaemenid Empire was the first to incorporate the lands of the Near East and India together, the two were not as separated in antiquity as many people suppose. Trade between India and Mesopotamia seems to have been a normal phenomenon even in the later periods of prehistory, and goods from India and nearby Afghanistan had found their way to places as far away as Egypt in extremely remote antiquity. As such, India was not an unknown and far-flung land to the ancient Persians, but a place where there was known to be wealth and an advanced civilized society. Late in Achaemenid history, the Nanda Empire was formed, encompassing much of northern India. When the Achaemenids fell shortly after, this empire was left as the predominant power in India until it was later defeated and became a part of the subsequent Maurya Empire.

Media- The historical relationship between Persia and Media is one that is very significant to the history of the Achaemenid Empire. Media, though it is quite possible that it was not the center of the great empire that some accounts suggest, was a major regional power

with ties to most of the lands that eventually became part of the Achaemenid Empire and a regional hegemony that allowed it to exert its power throughout the East. Media's proximity to the Persian homeland inside of what is today Iran made it an important region to control, as revolts there could potentially threaten Persia itself. Media was also a main supplier of troops for the Persian army's many campaigns.

Phoenicia- Occupying a small strip of land on the western edge of the Mediterranean Sea, Phoenicia was not on par with the great and ancient powers such as Assyria, Elam and Babylon that were incorporated into the Achaemenid Empire. However, this lack of territory was more than made up for by the maritime tradition of the Phoenicians themselves. Controlling vast trade routes that extended to every corner of the Mediterranean basin and along the entire coastline of northern Africa, the Phoenicians would become the suppliers of goods and, more importantly, ships to the Achaemenid Empire.

Palestine- Albeit a fairly minor region in the context of the Achaemenid Empire, many people today are as familiar as they are with the Persian kings of this empire because of biblical descriptions regarding their policies toward the Hebrews in Palestine. It is known that the Achaemenid kings were generally more liberal in their policies toward this population than their predecessors in the Neo-Babylonian Empire, which had held Palestine as a territory prior to the rise of the Persians.

Thrace- Conquered during Darius the Great's campaign against the Scythian tribes, Thrace was an important province of the Achaemenid Empire for two primary reasons. The first was that, during its attempts to invade Greece, the Persian army used Thrace for both safe passage toward the Greek mainland and as a supply base that could be used to feed the army. The second reason that Thrace was valued as an Achaemenid province was that it was a major supplier of troops for the army of Persia.

Appendix B

Notable Satraps

A reader who has gone through this work's preceding discussion of the history of the Achaemenid Empire will likely come away with a good understanding of just how important the *satraps* appointed by the Achaemenid emperors were in shaping that history. Many of these *satraps* also changed the course of Achaemenid history by disobeying and rebelling against the kings that installed them. Some of the most notable *satraps* are briefly discussed below.

Artaphernes- As the *satrap* of Sardis during the Ionian revolt, Artaphernes found himself in a position that would dictate much of

the history of the empire he served. The taking and burning of Sardis was the main reason for the long-standing Persian hatred of Greece under Darius the Great and many of his successors. It is impossible to say how history may have been different if Artaphernes had been more successful in his defense of Sardis, but it may well be that the Greco-Persian Wars as we know them today would either not have occurred at all or would have been a much more minor series of conflicts.

Otanes- One of the nobles who conspired with Darius the Great in the murder of Bardiya, Otanes was one of the most powerful men in the empire outside of Darius himself. Some accounts dealing with the supposed imposter Bardiya suggest that Otanes was the first man to begin to suspect that the person who had claimed the throne was not the real Bardiya, but it is very likely that this account is a *post hoc* concoction meant to strengthen the idea that Bardiya had died before Cambyses II set out for Egypt.

Megabyzus- (Note: There are other figures in Achaemenid history with the same and very similar names). Megabyzus was a prominent figure during the reigns of both Xerxes the Great and Artaxerxes I. The first accounts dealing with his life involve his actions during the putting down of the Babylonian revolt early in Xerxes' reign. This is of especial interest, as Megabyzus was himself the son of the *satrap* who had started the revolution in Babylon. After acting as one of the commanders during Xerxes' Greek invasion, Megabyzus became the

satrap of the Syrian province. Later, he was instrumental in putting down the rebellion in Egypt that occurred in the mid 5th century BCE. Megabyzus eventually led Syria in an uprising against Artaxerxes, but was coerced back into the empire with the promise of a pardon and the retention of his *satrapy*. An almost certainly apocryphal tale suggests that he was exiled after killing a lion in a royal lion hunt, denying Artaxerxes himself the privilege of the kill. The same tale recounts that he later disguised himself and made his way back to Susa, where he received a royal pardon. In all likelihood, this story about the later days of the famed general and *satrap* Megabyzus is partially or entirely fictitious.

Ariobarzanes- Ariobarzanes is a fascinating historical figure in that he was the final leader of the Achaemenid army to fight a major battle against Alexander the Great, even as Darius III moved into the eastern provinces. This battle, known as the Battle of the Persian Gate, was a last ditch defensive effort to prevent the taking of Persepolis and of the land of Persia itself. Ariobarzanes, as *satrap* of Persia, led this initiative, though his forces were badly outnumbered and stood little chance against the Macedonian army. Employing a tactic very similar to that of the Greeks at the Battle of Thermopylae, Ariobarzanes placed his smaller force in a tight pass that could be used to stop the Macedonians from advancing or turning his flank. Using archers to pressure the Macedonian advance, Ariobarzanes trapped the army of Alexander in the narrow pass called the Persian Gate by ambushing him at its narrowest point, which was fairly far

inside the pass. This cost Alexander a disproportionately high number of men, as his soldiers were suddenly caught in a killing zone between a defensive Persian force and their own rear columns, which were still advancing and oblivious to the battle ahead. Alexander finally managed to maneuver around the pass and trap the Persians, prompting Ariobarzanes to lead a final charge directly into the Macedonian line rather than allow himself and his few remaining soldiers to be captured. Though a comparatively minor battle, the Battle of the Persian Gate was the final time that a force under a commander loyal to the Achaemenid Empire would seriously threaten the army of Alexander.

Pharnabazus II- A *satrap* of Phrygia, Pharnabazus II was instrumental in enacting the policies of the Achaemenid Empire toward Greece during the reigns of Darius II and Artaxerxes II. Pharnabazus would be one of the two *satraps* (the other being Tissaphernes) who would cultivate a loose alliance with Sparta to curb Athenian military ambitions. Later, however, Pharnabazus II would find himself in conflict with Sparta under the rule of Agesilaus II.

Tabalus- One of the first generation of *satraps* installed by Cyrus the Great during the creation of the empire, Tabalus was put in power as the governor of Lydia after it had been conquered. He later found himself pinned down in Sardis by the revolution led by the Lydian Pactyes. Though of somewhat less historical significance than others on this list, Tabalus is important in terms of giving modern historians

a more complete understanding of the earliest *satraps* and the instability that often plagued them as regional rulers of nations that had just recently been conquered by a very young Achaemenid Empire.

Appendix C

Major Archaeological Sites and Artifacts

Defining the Achaemenid Empire archaeologically is a somewhat difficult task, as it was built on several existing civilizations that all continued to exist as their own unique cultural entities within the superstructure of the empire. As such, there is no sudden break that differentiates those civilizations under their own rule from their characteristics under Achaemenid rule. However, several artifacts and finds that can be definitively dated to the Achaemenid period are known. Below is a list of a few of the most important of these finds and sites.

The Cyrus Cylinder- Probably the best-known of all individual Achaemenid artifacts, the Cyrus Cylinder is a large baked clay cylinder covered in many lines of Akkadian text in the cuneiform script. The cylinder was found in 1879 by noted Middle Eastern archaeologist

Hormuzd Rassam, who conducted several digs throughout Mesopotamia, unearthing many important finds from both the Babylonian and Assyrian civilizations. The cylinder was discovered in the foundations of a temple in Babylon that had been restored under Cyrus, and is the most complete Persian account that is contemporary with his reign. It includes a denouncement of Nabonidus, the last Babylonian king before the Persian conquest, along with a description of the generous policies that Cyrus pursued toward Babylon.

Persepolis- As an Achaemenid archaeological site, Persepolis is by far the most important, as it was actually created by the already powerful Achaemenid kings, rather than simply being an addition to an existing city. Though badly damaged today due to having been burned during the fall of the Achaemenid Empire at the hands of Alexander, many of the structures have survived at least well enough to provide modern archaeologists and historians with a layout of the city. This destruction, however, was far from the end of the history of Persepolis. Indeed, the city and the areas around it were inhabited until sometime in the early second millennium CE.

Persepolis is one of the greatest examples of the hybrid art and architecture that defined Achaemenid Persia. The many palaces built there over the rules of several different kings also give modern historians a glimpse at the development of the capital over the course of Achaemenid history. Due to its long history and the fact that it was built atop a raised terrace, much of the city's ruins remained exposed

into the historic era. Excavations throughout the 1930s unearthed the portions of the city that had been buried, and revealed that the ancient ruins were in fact the ancient capital of the Achaemenid Empire. The city has since been the focus of extensive research into this era of Persian history.

Behistun Inscription- Were a list to be compiled of the most important archaeological finds of all of ancient history, the Behistun inscription would, without any serious doubt, find its place quite high on that list. This status as one of the most important of all ancient texts does not come from the contents of the inscription (though they are still of great historical significance), but from the fact that it proved to be the key to the decipherment of the cuneiform script. As such, it allowed modern scholars to read Old Persian, Assyrian, Babylonian, Hittite, and several other languages and dialects that made use of this script. Without the 3 language text of the inscription, we would likely not be able to refer to any of the Babylonian and Assyrian sources that make up much of the historical corpus of the ancient world. The inability to read Babylonian texts would also significantly damage our understanding of the Achaemenid Empire, as many of the historical accounts we rely on today are of Babylonian origin. Without these accounts, we would be left only with Greek histories which, while generally accurate, sometimes fall into the understandable inaccuracy of having been written by historians from outside of the empire relying on third or fourth hand accounts.

Palace of Darius at Susa- Although Darius built the city of Persepolis as the ceremonial center of his empire, much of the normal administrative function of the Achaemenid Empire was still centered in Susa, the ancient capital city of Elam. As such, a secondary palace was built at Susa for the times when the emperor resided there. Inscriptions that have survived tell of the opulence of this temple, which was decorated with cedar, gold, silver and ivory brought from across the entire empire. Much like the city of Persepolis, it was built on top of a raised platform that had been artificially constructed for it. Though the palace burned down during the height of the Achaemenid Empire, it was later restored and was still standing when Alexander's forces entered Susa. From the ruins that survive today, archaeologists have identified multiple courts and halls, as well as rooms that are thought to have been meant for the storage of the treasury. Decorative artwork recovered from this palace can currently be found on display in the Louvre.

Pasargadae- As the original capital of the empire, Pasargadae was a main power center in the early Achaemenid period, though its influence declined greatly in later years with the construction of Persepolis. To some degree, however, the city always maintained an elevated status in the empire and throughout the history of Iran because of its role as the capital and burial place of Cyrus the Great. In a sense, Pasargadae's more modest importance was a contributing factor to its modern state of fairly good preservation, as it was not subjected to the destruction of war that many other major cities were

toward the end of the Achaemenid Empire. Excavations at the site did not seriously begin until the early 20th century. Regular archaeological work at the site has continued intermittently throughout most of the last century, though a long hiatus occurred after the Iranian revolution of 1979.

Ecbatana- As the capital of the Medes before Cyrus the Great defeated them and created the Achaemenid Empire, Ecbatana played a critical role in the very earliest days of the empire. Archaeologically, the site currently identified as Ecbatana presents an interesting case. Though there is little doubt that the site went by that name during its history, it has been suggested that the site which is currently known is only one of two cities called Ecbatana that existed in ancient Iran, and that it is in fact not the one that would have been the capital of the Medes. Conflicting sets of evidence in some cases support and in others do not support this hypothesis. On the one hand, none of the ancient sources make mention of a second Ecbatana, supporting the conclusion that there is only one. The noted French archaeologist Jacques de Morgan also reported having found remains he believed to date to the Achaemenid era during his researches at the site in the late 1800s. Recent excavations at the site of Tel Hagmatana (the site that is traditionally identified as Ecbatana), however, have yielded neither Median nor Achaemenid era ruins or artifacts. Indeed, nothing predating the Parthian period has been found at the site by modern and scientific archaeological investigations. This fact has left Ecbatana as something of an archaeological mystery. The prevailing consensus

at the moment is that the Parthian Ecbatana was built on top of or very near to an earlier settlement that dated into the period of Median supremacy. Other scholars, however, have offered the theory that this site is not Ecbatana at all, but that the real Ecbatana has yet to be discovered and properly identified.

Appendix D

The Languages of the Achaemenid Empire

Because of its nature as an empire comprised of many varied states and civilizations, the Achaemenid Empire had no single language that was universally used by all of its inhabitants. Following are brief overviews of the major languages that would have been in use in the Achaemenid Empire, though it should be understood that there were many regional languages spoken by smaller populations that will not rate a mention here

Old Persian- As the native language of the Persian kings and nobles themselves, Old Persian was an important administrative language in the Achaemenid Empire. Written using a somewhat modified style of Akkadian cuneiform, this language is known to have changed over the course of Achaemenid history, becoming an early version of what is denoted as Middle Persian by the time of the

conquests of Alexander. Because of the fact that it had no native writing system prior to encountering cuneiform after the Persians migrated into Iran, it is not known how far back into history the existence of this language goes. This language is the direct ancestor of the modern Persian language, also known as Farsi, that is still used extensively in Iran and in surrounding countries to this day.

Median- Though little is known of the ancient language of the Medes, it is known that they had their own unique linguistic system, of which several words are thought to have found their way into old Persian as loanwords. Though no longer known today, the Median language would have been an important one during the period of Median supremacy that occurred between the fall of the Neo-Assyrian Empire and the foundation of the Achaemenid Empire.

Akkadian- Being that both the languages of Babylonia and Assyria were dialects of the incredibly ancient Akkadian language (which is attested in some instances in even very early Sumerian texts), it was one of the more prevalent languages in the central portion of the empire. Akkadian had also been used, in its Babylonian form, as a major diplomatic language throughout the Near East for many centuries before the establishment of the Achaemenid Empire, making it easily recognized in many of the varied provinces of the empire.

Sanskrit and Other Indian Languages- For most of its

history, India has been a culture of many languages, and this was very likely the case even during the time of the Achaemenid Empire. We can be sure, however, that a form of the Sanskrit language existed during this time, as it was around the time of the height of the Achaemid Empire that modern linguistic scholars believe that the transition from Vedic Sanskrit to Classical Sanskrit occurred. Sanskrit itself is related to Persian, sharing common roots in Central Asia. Other Indian languages, including Pali and several different forms of the Dravidian language family, were probably also spoken regionally throughout the areas controlled by the Achaemenid Empire. This period, however, predates the now common Indian language of Hindi.

Elamite- Dating back into the early centuries of the third millennium BCE (very likely earlier, but this is its earliest written attestation), Elamite had been the major language of Iran for nearly two thousand years prior to the migration of the Persians and other related groups into Iran from the vast plains of Central Asia. Though ancient, Elamite remained a widely used language through the Achaemenid period, though it appears to have largely disappeared, along with the distinct Elamite civilization that spoke it as a native tongue, toward the end of the Achaemenid Empire. Like Akkadian and Old Persian, Elamite was written in a type of cuneiform. The same text in all three of these languages makes up the Behistun Inscription.

Late/Demotic Egyptian- Though it was rarely used in the wider regions of the empire, the Egyptian language, a later version of

the same language that had been spoken there since the earliest dynasties, was still used throughout the kingdom surrounding the Nile delta. By this time in its history, the written form of the Egyptian language was moving away from hieroglyphics and hieratic and toward the Demotic writing system, which would later form the basis of the Coptic writing system.

Various Greek Dialects- Though the Achaemenid Empire never did manage to conquer mainland Greece, its occupation of the Ionian city-states and frequent dealings with both Sparta and Athens led to the inclusion of various dialects of ancient Greek into the common languages of the empire. The Ionic dialect, used by the city-states that were frequently part of the empire, was probably the most commonly used. Doric and Attic dialects (used by Sparta and Athens, respectively), would however have been major diplomatic tongues. Aeolic and Achaean were probably also introduced to lesser degrees through occasional diplomatic relations with states that spoke these dialects.

Aramaic- An ancient Semitic language (a group of which the oldest known language is Akkadian), Aramaic was in widespread use throughout much of the former Neo-Assyrian Empire, as it had become a semi-official second state language to the Assyrian dialect of Akkadian under the rule of the Neo-Assyrian kings. Aramaic would remain as a common language in Syria and surrounding areas well into the common era. In Achaemenid Persia, Aramaic would also

develop into a literary form that was commonly used for the writing of more elaborate texts.

Phoenician- A branching off of the Canaanite language family, Phoenician was not used widely throughout the empire, but was understood in many of the lands around the Mediterranean due to the widespread trading networks of the Phoenicians. This language is also the source of the earliest known precursor of the Latin alphabet, which itself formed much of the basis for the modern English alphabet.

Hebrew- Though mostly localized to Mesopotamia and Palestine, the Hebrew language was an important regional language. The movement of Hebrew-speaking populations during the short-lived Neo-Babylonian Empire had facilitated the spread of Hebrew into areas beyond its native region of southern Palestine. Because of its religious usage and unbroken spoken tradition lasting well into the modern era, the Hebrew language would go on to become an important reference point for scholars in reconstructing the Semitic languages of the ancient Near East that had died out in ancient times.

Appendix E

Short Bibliography of Recommended Further Reading

Having read this history of the Achaemenid Empire, it is the hope of the author that many of you will wish to learn more about this fascinating first empire of Persia. To help with whatever further learning you may wish to do in this subject area, a selected bibliography will be provided below that should provide you with excellent resources for a more complete and in-depth study of the Achaemenid Empire.

Herodotus. The Histories. London, England. Penguin Classics.

Axworthy, Michael. (2010). A History of Iran. New York, New York. Basic Books.

Daryaei, Touraj (Editor). (2014). The Oxford Handbook of Iranian History. Oxford, England. Oxford University Press.

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Kuhrt, Amelie. (2007). The Persian Empire. New York, New York. Routledge Publishing.

Allen, Lindsay. (2005). The Persian Empire. Chicago, Illinois. University of Chicago Press

Conclusion and a Brief Word From the Author

The Achaemenid Empire's historical significance carries out far beyond the years during which it was extant. By tying together regions of the globe that had previously had only regional affiliation with each other, the empire affected the entire course of history in the Old World as we today know it. The movement of goods, populations and ideas across its vast extent shaped the world in ways that could not previously have been imagined.

From the historical perspective, the Achaemenid Empire is a bridge that joins together two eras of ancient history. Incorporated into it were civilizations such as Babylonia, Assyria, Egypt and Elam that dated back to the very dawn of history itself. These civilizations had been the driving engines of history in the Near East for more than two millennia before the rise of the first Persian empire. With the conquests of Cyrus the Great and the dominion of his successors, the history of these ancient civilizations as unique cultural entities largely came to a close, although their influence would still be felt for many

centuries more through the later Persian empires. The Achaemenid Empire, however, drew the curtain on the golden ages of these great civilizations, many of which had already declined from their high points several centuries earlier, and ushered in a new period of history. Even in its last days at the hands of Alexander the Great, the Achaemenid Empire continued to play this role as a historical bridge between periods, as its defeat by the noted Macedonian king and commander paved the way for the Hellenization of the Near East. Greek influences would find their ways into lands that had been the seats of great civilizations centuries before even the earliest of Greek cultures flourished, creating what is today known as Hellenistic culture by blending Greek and Near Eastern traditions together.

Though the Achaemenid Empire was a comparatively brief political and cultural entity, its importance would be difficult if not impossible to understate. It not only brought ideas from all over the known world together, but also made Persia, formerly nothing more than one among many regional provinces in modern Iran, the center of the largest land empire that had ever existed up to that point. This new role for Persia and for Iran in general would make it an influential and important regional power for many centuries after the fall of Darius III.

The effects of the Achaemenid Empire also spread into even its more remote areas. Many kingdoms in Central Asia owed their origin to the *satrapies* established by Cyrus and his successors, and the formation of

major empires in India came as an indirect result of the power structure that had been pioneered by the Achaemenid kings. In this way, the Achaemenid Empire, its creation and its fall set off many chains of events in the various kingdoms that had made it up, each diverging into its own separate regional history and continuing as a part of global history. While the same could be said of any large multinational empire, the degree to which the Achaemenid Empire shaped the ancient world is truly remarkable to contemplate.

In closing, I would like to briefly thank you for having downloaded and read *The Achaemenid Empire: The First Great Persian Empire*. It is my hope that it was not only enlightening and educational, but also interesting and entertaining as well. As with my other short histories, my goal in this work has been to convey in an engaging manner the remarkable facts of this ancient empire. I would also like to thank those of you who have read my other short histories up to now. The response and popularity of my previous works has been truly incredible, and for that I owe an immense debt of gratitude to those of you who have selected my short history books as one of your sources of information about the ancient world.

For those of you who haven't yet seen my other works, you'll find links below that will take you directly to the relevant Amazon pages:

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[The Sumerians: History's First Recorded Civilization](#)

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It is my plan to write several more of these short, economical histories of the ancient world. If you would like to be informed when my future works are released, you can follow my author page on Amazon. Simply follow the link below and click the yellow “Follow” button, and Amazon will send you notifications of future releases.

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Finally, I would like to invite those of you who are willing to do so to leave an honest review of your thoughts about this short book. Feedback from readers is the best way for me to find out what readers like about my books and what I can do to improve future works. To leave feedback, simply return to the page from which you downloaded this book and leave a brief, honest review of your thoughts.

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